

Negative Halo 2 Revised

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Summary: The invasion of Earth, the discovery of Delta Halo, and the start of the Covenant Civil War... through the eyes of the Covenant.

1. Memories and Regrets

Chapter 1: Memories and Regrets

****A little less than two months ago****

So cold

Space was an infinite, frigid, black abyss, or so they said. Ships traversed it majestically and with certainty of their destination, but Orin's 'Fulsamee's ship was granted no such majesty or certainty. Creatures existed easily in space either in the comfortable confines of a ship or the fitting limits of a space suit, but neither Orin nor his compatriots who were identically derelict were offered such comfort. So many Sangheili poets, before the time of war and strife engulfed their noble race, called space a great, nurturing mother who cared for all her children and never turned her back on any of them.

Orin, a Sangheili himself, was currently inclined to disagree. He found space to be cruel and unforgiving, with an icy hand that left nothing but death and ruin wherever it swept. In that regard, the young warrior was almost certain that the humans had been born from this abysmal traitorous mother. In particular, he thought of the human warrior in special armor that had brought him pain and misery enough to last a lifetime in only four days. His mind was consumed by rage, hatred, and perhaps a little fear towards this human, this demon, but all he was capable of achieving with those powerful emotions was a long and pained groan. His body was broken, mangled; the shockwave from the detonation of the sacred ring had hurled his beaten figure onto the hard metal floor, which hadn't helped to ease the pain of his injuries.

His young, dark eyes flitted about the room as the grip of shock began to take him once more. He saw the shape of his friend and fellow Sangheili Yarna 'Orgalmee unconscious on the deck and in a position not unlike his own. He knew exactly what his trusted companion was dreaming of in his forced slumber: the wholesale slaughter of all of humanity, the completion of the Great Journey and their ascension to Godhood. His eyes moved over the soft, gently blinking lights of consoles and spied his other friend, Rurut, asleep in a chair, peacefully sleeping off the wear and tear of the past few days with his methane breather wheezing and hissing with each drawn and expelled breath. Most Unggoy such as he were cowards, but Orin had seen this one fight, and knew that he was a true warrior, worthy of the jet-black armor on his body that was identical to the others'. However, floating dead in space hardly left them striking.

Orin tried to move his arms and legs, willing himself to get back up into the chair, but his limbs would not listen, instead content to lie there, inert and bloody. Traitors, he thought and cursed his appendages bitterly for their betrayal of his brain. He let out a pained sigh and attempted to fall asleep, but before he could achieve a state like his comrades, he heard soft pinging on the hull.

Only Jackals, the thin, vulture-like assassins and scouts of the Covenant, had a better sense of hearing than Elites, and Orin found himself straining to keep track of the sound as it progressed across the outer hull of the craft. The pinging turned to clattering, and the clattering to a loud hiss. A new light flashed on some console within the cockpit, and judging by its relative position Orin could immediately tell that it was an alert: the outer doors of the Spirit-class dropship had just been opened. A moment later, there was another hiss, and a low-volume alarm called out a notice that the troop compartment of the craft was being pressurized once again, then an alert that the process was completed. The strange sounds resumed, this time making their way towards the cockpit door.

The young Elite warrior realized that he was in no position to defend either himself or the other soldiers that were in the cockpit should these sounds belong to enemies. Once more he tried to push himself up and crawl towards some defensible position, but his muscles merely screamed back at him in agonizing protest. Helpless and at the mercy of these intruders, he waited with bated breath as the door separating the control center from the troop compartment slid open.

An insectoid head appeared, followed by a body of similar caliber. It had arms that were as long as its legs, with spikes and tiny hairs running down the length of all its limbs. It had an abdomen that jutted out behind it with two vestigial pincer-like appendages, one on each side. Wings hung off its back and feathery antennae jutted out from the top of its small, flat skull, with two emerald eyes looking out from under them. It cocked its head quizzically and floated forward, the insectoid wings on its back propelling itself forward with a quiet buzzing noise. A second one moved in through the same door, looking around in mild curiosity.

Approaching Orin, it prodded the semi-conscious alien with one of its two, needle-like toes. The Elite roared out in pain; even the slightest pressure on his body caused him immense pain. He found himself on the verge of blacking out and blinked fiercely to fend off

the blackness that was closing in over his consciousness. He detested his weakness, all brought on by that humanâ€¦

The newcomer, whom OrinÃ© recognized as a Yanme'e, jumped back, clearly startled by the still-living Elite. He turned back to the other Drone and jabbered urgently. The other clicked in response and floated further into the cockpit, pausing to examine the slumbering Grunt and the other, unconscious Elite. OrinÃ©'s left eye tracked the exploring Drone while his right paid attention to the second bug. The one that had prodded him withdrew a small remote and activated a toggle. A small light on the top of the device changed from a pallid purple to a brilliant blue.

Continuing to float about and examine control panels, the Drones remained inside the cockpit with the three warriors. As they moved about, OrinÃ© studied them. The Covenant really only used Drones for ship maintenance, since the bloated-looking and incredibly intelligent Engineers could not function where there was no oxygen. Drones, on the other hand, did not breathe at all; some sort of perpetual chemical reaction within their bodies that began when they hatched kept them alive.

Finally, after what seemed like hours but was probably just a few more minutes, the dropship shuddered and the distinct clang of magnetic locks resounded through the wounded hull. OrinÃ© felt inertia, his small vessel being pulled towards a bigger object, probably one of the Covenant's cruisers. There was a moment of weightlessness, his body floating an inch off the deck before the larger ship's gravity field took over and he fell to the deck once more. Pain shot throughout his body and he let out another shout as white-hot pokers seared his flesh and pushed inward. The Drones hovered out of the cockpit, not bothering to close the door behind them, as the doors of the dropship fell open and they escaped into the hangar of the larger vessel.

Suddenly, OrinÃ© and his comrades were overrun by technicians and medics, Grunts and Elites wearing white armor. Rurut, who was in the best condition by far, was roused to consciousness and walked out of the damaged dropship. Yarna was helped out by two Healers, but he was able to walk with assistance off the ship. OrinÃ©, however, was faring much worse than both of them. He had lost a lot of blood; one of the Healers had the misfortune to lose his footing on the large slick purple stain and bang his head on a console. An anti-gravity stretcher was brought, and OrinÃ© screamed bloody murder when his would-be rescuers were forced to pick him up in order to place him on it. As he was being carried off the ship, unconsciousness finally claimed him.

Space was a cruel mistress indeed.

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When he next awoke, OrinÃ© noticed first the pleasant purple sheen of Covenant-made metal. He was on his back, staring up at a bright light. He squinted against the rough illumination, trying to make out the details of his new location. Hazy memories of the dropship and of Halo were trickling in, but he was lost in a flow of painkillers. As far as he could tell, by the Grunt Healers on the edge of his vision

and the many sensors strapped to his body, he was in a healing bay. Sure enough, when he glanced around, he saw medicinal herbs growing out of troughs near the ceiling.

OrinÃ© sat upâ€| rather, he propped himself up on his elbows and looked around. He cocked his head in curiosity as he realized that he wasn't in a public bay, but instead in a private healing room. The Grunts looked up, surprised to see him conscious, let alone managing to prop himself up. They turned to each other and jabbered in their native tongue; one jogged out of the room on some errand while the other waddled up to the side of the bed.

"Excellency," he said quietly and with appropriate awe, "You must rest." But instead of listening the young Sangheili was giving himself the once-over to make sure everything was working and in the right place. Healing salves had been swabbed over his burned skin with purple-stained fabric patches resting on top; his left wrist was held immobile in a gravity field sustained by a small device wrapped around his forearm, but beyond that he seemed okay. Carefully he pulled back one of the patches, sucking in a breath as he did so. It came out in a single sigh when he glimpsed that his skin underneath had already begun to heal. Relieved, he sank back into the gel bed and silently uttered a brief prayer of thanks.

The Grunt checked a few holographic readings of his health and took the opportunity to switch a few of the blood-heavy cloths with new immaculate ones. They were warm as they went on; the feeling was the most relaxing he had ever experienced.

A moment later the other white-armored Unggoy returned with a Sangheili in tow; he wore the gold armor and markings of a Field Master. Discipline dictated that OrinÃ© immediately sit up and salute, but due to perhaps the painkillers or the lethargy brought on by his previously life-threatening wounds he found the strength to do nothing but nod towards his commanding officer. Fortunately the Field Master didn't seem to mind.

"OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee?" When he stood beside the bed, the gold-armored visitor towered over the injured warrior.

"Yes," OrinÃ© croaked in response, surprised at the weakness of his own voice.

The Field Master straightened. "I am Field Master Ako 'Jorkalee. It is my pleasure to commend you, on behalf of the Prophet Hierarchs, on your survival of this catastrophe. Thousands died upon the ring, but your squad was able to escape and live to fight another battle."

As he spoke, despite his congratulatory tone, the dishonor of his actions began to sink in. Not only had he been wounded, but almost all of his Special Operations squadron had been killed, including poor Commander 'Ongyomee. The memory of that horrific last night resurfaced in his mind: the dark skies contrasting the white snow, plasma and bullets filling the air. The Flood had begun to overwhelm the Covenant lines, and the appearance of a new foe, hordes of strange flying robots, had driven once proud and tenacious warriors into frenzies of desperation. But through it all, he remembered a human in armor with an opaque orange visor. The simple thought both boiled his blood and made his hearts quail in fear.

"Demon," he wheezed.

'Jorkalee cocked his head to one side. "Yes, our other sources have been saying that it was the Demon who destroyed the sacred ring. Your testimony will be recorded at a later date, however. There are more pressing matters to consider..."

"What," OrinÃ© began, but choked. He tried again. "What... happened to... it?"

Sighing the Field Master crossed his arms. "The Demon not only obliterated Halo, but he also was able to seize one of our ships with the help of several other humans and escape. Where he has gone, however, we cannot know."

"What... ship?"

"The _Ascendant Justice._"

That prompted a piteous groan from the bedridden Sangheili. The _Ascendant Justice_ had been the flagship of the Fleet of Particular Justice. Most of it had been quite close to the ring at the time of destruction so OrinÃ© could only guess that the damage was extensive, but to have the flagship hijacked? The Supreme Commander of the fleet would surely suffer.

"As I said, however," 'Jorkalee continued, "I am here to relay other news." OrinÃ© stared with a look of fatigue; the Field Master took it as a sign to go on. "High Charity shall be arriving within the week."

Despite the formidable force of the painkillers and his own exhaustion OrinÃ© immediately sat up straight; he quickly regretted it, crying out and falling back down onto the gel layer as his raw skin strained and his sore muscles felt like they were aflame. The Grunt Healer squealed a warning and fiddled with several controls; the warm numbness of medicine grew in OrinÃ©'s body.

"Here?" he managed weakly, looking up into his visitor's eyes. "The Prophets?"

A nod. "They had at first come so that the Council and the Assembly may see Halo's glory and we might begin the Great Journey. "But now they come to assess the damage caused by the Demon and the Flood, to place blame where it need fall, and to honor those who fought with valor."

There was an odd emphasis on the last part of that sentence. OrinÃ© eyed the Field Master warily. "Excellency?"

He shook his head. "No longer shall you need address me by that honorific," 'Jorkalee said. Somehow he managed to stand even straighter. "OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee, for your bravery in battle and your skill in leadership, for your adeptness with the sword and accuracy with the rifle, and for your faith in the Great Forerunners, I have the singular honor of informing you of your promotion. Following your successful recovery you shall be awarded the armor and position of an Elite Ultra."

OrinÃ©'s mandibles fell open in astonishment, but 'Jorkalee

continued. "In addition, upon your recovery, you and your comrade Yarna 'Orgalmee, plus one other survivor, shall be awarded the Etching of Glory for your feats of courage."

Pride flooded him. The Etching of Glory was the single highest honor any warrior could hope to obtain. Since had been a child, before even his education at Institution, it had been his dream to earn that distinction. His own father had never even been considered for it, and he had been in the battlegroup that laid siege to the Jiralhanae homeworld.

However, as all-encompassing as that feeling was, something was amiss. "What of Rurut?" His voice was hoarse, but it sounded slightly better than it had a minute ago.

"The Grunt?" 'Jorkalee snorted. "He was able to save his senior officer, and he shall be commended as well, I suppose. It is not my business to mingle with the Unggoy slaves."

"He saved me," OrinÃ© said. "Yarna did not believe me to be alive, but Rurut did." His throat burned, but he had to continue; Rurut deserved his own honor. "Had it not been for that 'Unggoy slave,' I would not be here to receive this award."

The Field Master glared down at the Sangheili in the bed before him. "What is it that you wish," he said, his tone dripping with disdain, "that he be awarded the Etching as well?"

OrinÃ© didn't have the strength to say anything, but he did manage to nod his head yes. 'Jorkalee continued to glare at him for a while longer before finally dipping his head slightly. "Very well, I shall report your... _recommendation _to the Council. They probably will not receive it well, however." He turned away and walked out.

His strength gone, the wounded Elite sank deeper into the gel. Sleep took him again.

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Two weeks had passed. OrinÃ© stood in another healing room, this one not the same as aboard the cruiser he had been taken to. Now he was in High Charity. A holographic representation of the city beyond the walls of the room was pressed into the wall; a window would have been too open, too vulnerable.

Following his medical transfer from the ship to the holy city, he had been visited by three people of note. The first was Yarna 'Orgalmee, OrinÃ©'s long time comrade. He had come to make sure the Sangheili was recovering well, and to boast about his conduct that had earned him his Etching of Glory. As OrinÃ© was still weak, all he could do was nod and talk in short sentences. The second came when he was a bit stronger, able to sit up in bed; Rurut had come to make sure he was all right, and to thank him for the recommendation for an Etching of Glory. As it stood, the Prophet Hierarchs had granted the request. OrinÃ© was overjoyed to hear it.

The third, however, came in the night. He deactivated the security measures around the healing room and entered silently, carrying a

solid metal ceremonial blade. A Jiralhanae assassin, one of the Brutes of the Covenant. He had breathed heavily once inside, thus waking the slumbering warrior and alerting him to a killer's presence. The Brute had obviously thought that a wounded, sleeping Sangheili would be an easy target. He had neglected to bring neither his sidearm or his bandolier; it was only the ape-like savage and his weapon.

When the Jiralhanae had swung the weapon downward, he had expected the nanometrically sharp blade to slice right through the Elite's neck. Instead, however, it stopped well short. Confused, the Brute glared through the darkness to see that his target had raised his forearm, blocking the blade. It had bit deeply into Orin's flesh, purple blood flowing and gushing from the wound, but the Elite bit back his pain. Fighting unconsciousness, Orin bellowed a warcry, reached up to seize the Brute's head, and twisted it until he heard a loud crack. The lifeless Jiralhanae fell bodily to the floor, black fluid trickling from its mouth. Before falling back into a coma, Orin was able to signal a Healer to attend him.

Now Orin waited in his room, but this time it was for no assailant. He was dressed in a suit of pearlescent silver armor that he had personally received from the High Prophet of Regret only a day ago. The frail creature had made a show of it, calling Orin the greatest hero the Covenant had ever known, a reputation second only to that of the sacred Arbiters. Secretly Orin believed the Prophet to have had a hand in the attempt on his life, but to say such a thing aloud was foolish. A second, more successful assassination would follow. However, what Regret spoke was slowly becoming true. Already, Orin and his compatriots' names were becoming legendary among the Covenant, for having beaten the humans, overcome the Flood, survived the loss of Halo, and for thwarting the jealous retribution of the Brutes.

Such fame ran in the 'Fulsam Lineage. Orin's father had been a war hero during the subjugation of the Jiralhanae, having led the attack on their homeworld beside the great Fleet Master Lyos 'Vadumee when the Ship Master of his father's vessel had been medically unable. Orin's older brother had risen high in the ranks of the Covenant, but neither Orin nor the rest of his family knew what had become of him.

There was a hiss as the door to the room slid open. Orin glanced over his shoulder to see an Elite Minor clad in cobalt armor enter and bow very low.

"Excellency," he said reverently, "the ceremony is ready. Already the throngs scream your name."

Orin was unused to such praise, having himself been but a humble warrior much like his attendant scarcely three weeks ago. "Very well," he said, "let us go and meet them." The Minor led him from the room to a gravity lift, which then took them up several hundred levels to the highest part of the spire. Several times they were exposed to the outside, and Orin looked over the great city. It was vast, the great city stretching for almost as far as the eye could see, rendered slightly hazy by the obscuring white light from the many buildings and artificial light generators. Dominating the skyline was a massive delta shape with a solitary spike extending several miles upward, almost reaching the top of the dome that housed

the city. It was massive and centered where everybody would see it every day, the holiest of holy artifacts: the only surviving Forerunner ship. It was bathed in a serene, surreal white light from above, though the source was lost to OrinÃ©; above it was an opening to space shielded by an invisible barrier of energy.

The lift terminated, and the pair stepped off. They found themselves in the center of a large circular room, where several figures were waiting. Yarna 'Orgalmee stood tall and proud in his jet black armor of a Special Operative; beside him, and much shorter, was Rurut. He wore silver armor much like OrinÃ©'s, though designed for Unggoy anatomy. OrinÃ© had demanded that Rurut wear such armor, citing once more the Grunt's bravery and valor in combat. The diminutive slave had become a hero among the Unggoy in the Covenant, some even going so far as to suggest that he might be the newly come liberator of the Grunts, a position never heralded since the Grunt Rebellion. Both of his comrades were in the company of attendants, Yarna with an Elite Minor and Rurut with a Grunt Major.

OrinÃ© went forward at a steady limp; he was still quite injured, but at least capable of movement. He clasped hands with Rurut and touched foreheads with Yarna. "My brothers," he said, "we've survived the worst of it."

"I think not," Yarna chuckled. "We're heroes now; that means a whole new battlefield for us to fight and die on. The realm of politics waits for us."

Rurut cast a sharp glance at the black-armored Sangheili. "There's still much for us to worry about on the _real _battlefield as well."

Yarna squinted back at Rurut, but OrinÃ© quickly waved them both off. There was much to worry about and face later, yes, but for the day they were celebrities. They should be enjoying themselves on this day of feasts and celebration.

Before long, however, a fourth figure arrived escorted by his own attendant. He also wore the armor of Special Operations; as far as OrinÃ© could guess, he was the other survivor. Yet the Sangheili did not approach the group, taking the time only to salute OrinÃ© from afar.

A few moments later, two Elite Honor Guards stepped into the room and beckoned for them to follow. The entourage, with the two Honor Guards walking before the four celebrities and the attendants at the end, departed from the room. When they walked out, what awaited them blew them away: all down the walkway were Grunts and Elites, standing at the side; the Sangheili stood ramrod straight with a silent pride, but the Unggoy roared and clamored. But that was nothing: once they reached the end of the walkway, the three Prophet Hierarchs were waiting for them. Beyond the edge hundreds of thousands of people, civilian and soldiers alike, had gathered to crane their necks up and try to catch a glimpse of the four heroes. They stood in an amphitheater-like extension from the floors below that stretched out into the air; every fifteen yards a large holographic representation of the heroes and Hierarchs flickered and shone; once OrinÃ© and his companions came into view they erupted in a great cheer, warriors saluting, children waving flags, and many females reaching their arms up as if they could touch them. OrinÃ© blushed momentarily; he had

not yet found a mate, and wondered if they knew that down below.

The Prophet of Mercy turned towards the great crowd. "Please, be silent! Give these warriors the respectful quiet they deserve!" His voice was amplified by a hidden microphone. The undulating clamor from the masses quieted until it was just a dull roar. That seemed to please Mercy well enough.

While Mercy moved to join the Prophet of Regret in spectating the event, the Prophet of Truth moved forward on his hovering throne. Despite the obvious frailty of his species, there was something stronger about Truth than the other Hierarchs lacked. OrinÃ© surmised that it was something in the Prophet's eyes, some intelligence or cunning; whatever it was, it immediately demanded OrinÃ©'s admiration.

"Noble warriors of the Covenant," Truth began, "you have seen a great many things. You have faced the human threat, and you did not waver in your faith and honor; you witnessed the discovery and devastation of Halo, and still you stand here today; you met the terrible Parasite on the surface of the holy ring, and you did not cower, and indeed you survived to tell the story and warn others of their danger. Truly, the four of you are blessed by the Forerunners.

"It is my sacred duty, and I carry it out with pride, to award you the highest honor the Covenant may bestow upon a soldier." Two Elite Majors walked out, carrying between them laser-inscribing equipment. "Special Operative Balask 'Zakamee, please come forward."

The unknown Spec Ops warrior from before stepped forward and stood before the Hierarch before bowing low at the waist. "You are hereby commended for your survival, in a Wraith mortar tank no less, and of your courage and valor on the battlefield," the Prophet said. "Is there anything we might offer you in return for your great service?"

"If it please you, your Excellency," Balask spoke in a deep, gravelly voice, "I would like to return to combat soon."

"Your wish shall soon be granted, warrior," Truth said, nodding sagely. He then waved a hand at the two scribes, who stepped forward and began the process of lasering the Etching of Glory into 'Zakamee's armored breast. The process took roughly five minutes, a time OrinÃ© spent standing in place feeling awkward.

When the scribes were done, they stepped back, admiring the etching deeply carved into the surface of the black armor. Though slightly hard to see, the image commanded respect: a Sangheili skull resting on two crossed ceremonial swords over a shield. The masses erupted into applause as Balask stepped back, bowed again to the Prophets, and then took his place standing beside the others.

The Prophet of Truth turned to the remaining survivors. "Special Operative Rurut, please step forward." Rurut did as he was told, though it was more of an exaggerated waddle than a step. A hushed wave of whispering swept through the crowds; they all knew the controversy was coming, but still, the sight of a Grunt stepping forward to receive the award was a shock. "You have shown unprecedented courage," Truth continued, "in both facing the terrible Flood and rescuing your commanding officer when he was severely

wounded. Please, have the honor of being the first of your race to receive this greatest of awards." OrinÃ© noticed the Prophet hadn't asked if there was anything Rurut wanted, like he had Balask; some things, OrinÃ© rationalized, were just too odd. The scribes went to work on Rurut's silvery armor, having to stoop down very low, but they finished soon after and the Grunt Ultra took his place while the Unggoy in the crowd howled their admiration.

Next came Yarna. "Special Operative Yarna 'Orgalmee, please step forward." He did so, and stood proudly. In the clean lighting, his noble features were a lot more evident than on the dark and dusky battlefield. "Your display of unmatched valor and heroism is an inspiration, and your unmoving loyalty towards your teammates an enviable quality," Truth said. "Before you receive your etching, I would ask something of you."

"Anything you ask, noble Prophet, and I shall be happy to answer."

"Would you be so kind to grant me your presence among the Honor Guard?"

Yarna's mouth fell open in shock. OrinÃ© knew that Yarna loved the battlefield but secretly coveted the position of Honor Guard, as his father had been one himself for a time. The Spec Ops Elite recovered quickly and stood even straighter. "I would be honored to protect the Prophet Hierarchs and the Council, your Excellency. Please, permit me to join."

Truth nodded, and the scribes stepped forward. When they were done Yarna walked back to place amidst the cheers of the crowd. As he passed OrinÃ©, they shared a nod; the younger Sangheili had never seen his friend so happy.

Next, however, was OrinÃ©. A tightness seized his stomach, but he prepared himself. "Special Operations Commander OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee, please step forward." Though his name was made to sound important, OrinÃ© timidly stepped forward, hands clasped behind his back to hide his fidgeting fingers; he had not expected the "commander" to be added into his title. The Prophet of Truth hovered towards him. "You have shown great leadership abilities, prowess with weapons of all varieties, and courage when faced with the horrors of war."

_That's not true, _OrinÃ© thought, but didn't dare say it aloud. When Commander 'Ongyomee had died, OrinÃ© himself was wounded and unable to assume command. He hadn't be conscious to see how the team reworked itself afterwards. He painfully recalled the fear he felt when facing down the Flood in combat, and the hesitation he felt whenever he came into contact with humans.

Truth continued. "I would also be honored to have you join the Hierarchs' Guard."

OrinÃ© didn't become slack-jawed like his friend had; internally he rolled it over in his mind. He much preferred the battlefield of war to the battlefield of politics. All the standing around struck him as incredibly unpleasant, too. Finally he shook his head. "With respect, Excellency, I feel I would be better utilized in combat, conquering worlds and fighting my foes."

Truth nodded acceptingly and waved the scribes forward. They finished quickly, and OrinÃ© looked down at the gleaming emblem on his chest. He resumed his place as the crowds went absolutely wild.

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For OrinÃ© and Rurut, it was back to active duty, which suited both of them just fine. The Elite Ultra found himself in command, which was an odd change; his whole life he had been a second, never absolutely in charge of anything. Now, suddenly, the only authority higher than him was the Council and the Prophets.

Though his obligations demanded of him complete command, he had designated his own team of Spec Ops warriors, among which Rurut was the sub-Commander and Balask 'Zakamee was the Senior Warrior. Their task was to sift through the ruins of Halo and search for weapons, supplies, and data that could be salvaged. OrinÃ© carried it out with an appropriate degree of paranoia: the threat of the Flood still loomed over his mind. He knew from first-hand experience that the Parasite was deceptive, even in death. If he even suspected that there were Flood occupying any given piece of debris, he immediately had the offending piece of matter vaporized. Under his direct command was the heavy carrier Apotheosis of Duty, which he used to regularly annihilate such obstacles. His new silver armor glittered in the light of the destruction of countless Flood-infested pieces of free-floating detritus.

Weeks passed, and every day the Apotheosis of Duty was sent out to check for more items of value among the wreckage. A great deal of Covenant hardware was salvaged from the remains of Halo, but precious little data. A few times, however, the Prophets ordered OrinÃ© to take his team, or sometimes a larger contingent of infantry, down onto the larger portions of the sacred ring that still contained atmosphere and search areas that had evident Forerunner complexes. When this happened, OrinÃ© went down with a full team and with enough equipment to sustain a small camp for weeks. He would not allow the carrier to draw near to the site at all; the risk of the Flood eliminating the team and boarding the ship was too great. Instead, he'd go to the surface in a Phantom-class dropship. These new dropships had a much greater troop and equipment capacity, and had a miniature gravity lift that didn't require the craft to actually touch the ground. As soon as they reached the surface, OrinÃ© would order the pilots to pull out of the atmosphere and remain in low orbit, not to return until they received the appropriate signal.

On the surface, his troops always moved with careful precision, though if time allowed it OrinÃ© would have the soldiers under his command sweep through entire complexes and eradicate the remnants of the Flood that still clung to what was excused as life. The Grunts in his unit would be issued either overcharged Plasma Rifles that had 3 more charge per shot or a Fuel Rod Cannon, both weapons more than adequate to decimate the entire ranks of Flood that they came across. The Elites were given Plasma Swords, overcharged Plasma Rifles, and Carbines to deal with Flood and Sentinels, the mechanical warriors of Halo, though it was rare that any were found functioning.

However, one of his assignments brought him to the scene of his last battle on Halo. The snow-covered region had been damaged by the

annihilation of the ring, but that particular section escaped most of the damage that it could have suffered. As they flew through the valley en-route to the control room, or whatever remained of it, they passed over the site of the battle that had cost OrinÃ© so much: many of his friends, his commanderâ€¦ so many of his fellow soldiers, all to the Demon. He permitted himself to shed a single tear in their memory.

Besides his duties as a commander and leader, OrinÃ© found he had access to entirely new realms aboard High Charity. His status as an Ultra gained him instant recognition from Councilors: they invited him to their homes to drink of their wine and eat of their food. OrinÃ© never turned them down, and he found pleasant, intelligent conversation in abundance. Many of those he supped with had ulterior motives, to be sure, but some just wanted to enjoy his company. He found himself drawn more and more to political forums, where he would occasionally see Yarna, and he listened in on the latest discussions. Most of the debates were surrounding the Jiralhanae and the alarming rise in favor towards them, but others cropped up from time to time.

That was how he had first overheard of Regret's plan to take a fleet and investigate a planet. Apparently there had been data recovered from the ruins of the control room that suggested a certain planet held a great treasure of the Forerunners. The star was unidentified, but it had been confirmed that the planet held the third orbit, a good candidate for a Forerunner world.

The call for the fleet came quickly, and OrinÃ© and his team were placed high in the rosters. The _Apotheosis of Duty _was to remain behind, under command of its own Ship Master, and continue its duty; the Elite Ultra was to be transferred to another ship, though which one it was he couldn't be certain. Fifteen ships in all were to venture to this planet to search for the Forerunner artifact, but no one was certain what it was exactly that they were going to find.

2. Glory

Chapter 2: Glory

The bridge of the _Steadfast Knight _was a quiet din of activity: Sangheili deck officers clad in blue or red armor walked back and forth from holographic station to holographic station. Ordinarily the raised command platform was the only area of the bridge that had these light-created panels, but more had been conjured to accommodate the influx of bridge crew.

Orita 'Fulsamee watched over the activity from his post on the command platform, his old tired eyes moving back and forth steadily as the Elite Minors and Majors rushed to complete their tasks. The entire sub-bridge crew had been brought up to the main bridge to oversee their responsibilities. Usually the Ship Master preferred to be alone on the bridge, sending commands out via the communications channels, but with the Prophet of Regret leading the fleet, he wished for everything to be perfect. The cruiser under his command had to operate smoothly and respond to his orders instantly. Efficiency was key here, and it unfortunately brought with it activity and rabble.

An out-of-place figure stood in the midst of the flurry, staring up at the twin forward screens. A map of sorts was there, as well as an estimated countdown to their arrival in the target system. Orita smiled at the silver-armored Sangheili's back, at his son. Pride welled up within him: both Orita and his mate had known their son had been born to greatness; even after everything that had happened to him growing up, to their family, to the boy's twin, he had never allowed himself to be slowed. Now OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee stood as an Elite Ultra, of greater rank than even the Field Masters who oversaw ground combat. Orita may have even needed to call him "Excellency," if he hadn't known his son detested it.

"Son," he called out. The much younger Sangheili turned and looked up; Orita nodded to the place beside him. Leaving his place at the front of the bridge he walked around and up the ramp to the platform, taking his place beside his father.

"Yes, father?" he asked, inclining his head.

Orita merely smiled wider. "I am still overcome with joy that you have come so far. To think that once you were so tiny, I could place your head in the palm of my hand and your hooves would barely reach my elbow."

"Yes, father..."

The elder Sangheili held out his arm for emphasis. "This big!" He ran his finger up and down the golden armor, chuckling as he saw the exasperated look on his son's face.

"Father," OrinÃ© tried again, "I've seen much... too much, I sometimes believe." He looked at his sire, and Orita felt the weight behind his son's eyes. "How can I live with it? And now I have responsibilities, hundreds and thousands of lives are in my hands at any given moment. How do I shoulder the burden, and still walk as quickly as the sun?"

Orita nodded. His son was referencing an old Forerunner legend, of Lasanla and the pearl disc. According to the tale, Lasanla had been given charge of a planet, essentially becoming a god within a day. The sun of that planet had been unhappy with the Forerunner, believing itself to be more important and deserving of worship, and left. The natives of the planet needed the sun's light to live, and Lasanla, not wishing for his newfound people to be wanting, had taken it upon himself to become the new sun. So he took a large white mirror, pointed it at where the sun had run off too, and began walking through the atmosphere with this massive, heavy thing on his back. He did it for a week until the sun returned and, moved by his show of compassion, returned to his rightful place. The tale was childish and obsolete, riddled with inconsistencies even, but Orita understood what his offspring was trying to say.

"OrinÃ©," he said, putting a hand on the Elite Ultra's shoulder, "I understand your uncertainty. Indeed I was a good deal older than you when I had my first command, but I felt the same way. Just know that your mother and I are proud of you. Fulsa wouldâ€œ"

"The fleet is now exiting Slipspace, Excellency," an Elite spoke up. Orita was forced to cut the conversation short, turning to face the

forward screens. He reached out and touched a glyph floating in his console.

"All hands prepare for alternate space exit," he said. In the hallways he could hear the reverberations of his own voice. _Am I truly so old?_ "Forward cameras switch to real-time," he commanded, and the viewscreens changed from a tactical display to pure black. It flashed grey and, as a white film peeled back, a void filled with stars grew on the screen.

"Planetoid object detected to port," another Elite said. "Fleet adjusting to face."

"Adjust our position, face the planet," the Ship Master ordered.

A planet with a single moon filled their primary screen. The satellite was silver and barren, aside from a large sensor contact on the surface. The planet itself, however, was light on one side and dark on the other. On the light side, the bridge crew could see breathtaking greens and browns on the landmasses and deep blue oceans. On the dark side, however, were billions of orange lights that twinkled and glittered on the surface. It took a moment for the vision to sink in.

Panic exploded on the bridge.

"Estimated twenty billion class-A lifesigns detected..."

"Surface structures are detectable, matching... they seem to be human in build!"

"... human fleet is in position, as well as orbital platforms, count... three hundred?!"

OrinÃ© drew in a sharp breath. Orita glanced at him momentarily, but then refocused on the planet. Such a large number of lifesigns, coupled with the incredible human presence... "My son," he said quietly, though his voice was almost lost in the roar of incoming reports. At first the Elite Ultra didn't respond, but then he snapped back to reality and looked at his father. "Does this strike you as odd?"

"Indeed it does. Could we have found the human home world at last?" He spoke with near reverence. Orita agreed with the observation, but before he could say so the communications officer spoke up.

"A transmission from the _Pious Inquisitor_, Excellency."

The Ship Master nodded. The Prophet of Regret's flagship. "On screen two."

Suddenly the Prophet's wrinkled, jowly face appeared. "Mighty warriors, fear not this pitiful fleet! We must gain access to this world, and the great Forerunner secrets it holds! Destroy the humans' platforms, and cleanse their influence from this holy world!" The transmission ended.

"Excellency," the communications officer spoke again, "the _Inquisitor_ has transmitted a series of coordinates."

"Show me." They appeared on the screen, overlaid onto the image of the planet. The location fell on the side of the world that was in the sun, and past the protective sphere of defense platforms.

"Prepare fleet-wide transmission," he ordered, waited a second, and then began speaking: "To create a large enough window for the Prophet's vessel, we must destroy these three platforms that block access. Once that group is down, the carriers shall be able to pass through without risk of being fired upon by the other platforms."

A moment passed. "The Fleet Master is addressing all ships, Excellency," the communications officer reported again. Orita indicated for it to be put on the second screen. Seconds later a golden-armored Sangheili appeared, armor almost identical to the Ship Master's but with higher-ranked glyphs upon it.

"We shall be utterly destroyed if we stray too close to the platforms," the Fleet Master said. "All ships, prepare boarding craft and focus on the three indicated stations and those nearby." He disappeared a moment later.

OrinÃ© turned to leave. "I will assemble my team and infiltrate the human defense station." Before he could depart, however, Orita reached out and grabbed him. The Sangheili looked back over his shoulder, confused.

"Son," Orita said, "you cannot go yourself to this battle."

The shock in OrinÃ©'s eyes was evident, as well as the confusion. "Why not?"

"You are an Ultra now, and responsible for the troop movements aboard this ship. It is your duty to remain behind and coordinate the _Knight_'s boarding forces."

There was so much hurt in his son's eyes that Orita momentarily felt that he should abandon protocol and allow OrinÃ© to go, but duty was duty. His son had earned the glory of the station, but now he had to own up to its requirements.

Sullenly, the silver-armored Sangheili nodded. "I shall send word to my sub-Commander to lead the attack," he said, and moved towards the communications station.

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Rurut the Grunt sat in the hangar of the ship _Steadfast Knight_, resting his body and mentally preparing himself for battle. He had changed a lot since the battle at the ring: his eyes had become colder, his mind more steeled towards the thought of battle. Once there was a time when he would cower and fear the idea of plasma flying and bullets spraying; now he was apathetic. He scowled behind his methane breather, remembering when he was a raw recruit and aboard the _Pillar of Autumn_ above the sacred ring, Halo. He was just supposed to hold the grenades until he died, in which case the next Grunt would carry them. He lived, though, and went on to fight the humans on the ring world.

He shuddered visibly. That is, until the Flood appeared. They had torn a bloody swathe through the Covenant forces on Halo, an unstoppable juggernaut of death and corruption. Between the horrifying Infection Forms, the twisted Combat Forms, and the bloated Carrier Forms he wasn't sure which one he hated most. His eyes involuntarily narrowed as his stomach flip-flopped in his gut. Their assignment on Halo had been to locate the weapon that the Prophets had been searching for. But they had discovered that the Flood had been the weapon.

His team had lost so many good soldiers: Gagaw, Ononn, Ofoffâ€¦ even their commander, Ionill 'Ongyomee. Rurut directly attributed their deaths to the discovery of that wretched ring. Of course, the Grunt Ultra was not foolish enough to repeat such thoughts aloud: he would be charged with heresy and executed so fast it would make his head spin, quite literally. But it didn't change the fact that he believed the Hierarchs were directly at fault for all the casualties, all the suffering, and all the destruction that followed their insistence to locate the damned relic.

Rurut felt the urge to spit, but it would be a poor choice of expression while wearing his methane breather. He glanced around the hangar, noting the activity, and picking out the members of their new unit from among the crowd. It was larger than 'Ongyomee's unit back on the ring, but Rurut had come to understand that his previous unit was actually smaller than normal.

Of course, the Prophet of Regret had believed that their squad might need some extra bulk to it and commissioned two Brutes to accompany them in their assignment. They had names of course, Briareus and Sallius, but none of the unit seemed to care. To be honest, no one really liked them. They packed Brute Shots, grenade launchers with nasty blades for melee combat. The pair was extremely haughty and kept to themselves, though they weren't opposed to occasionally harassing the other members of the squad like they were doing right now: poor Nunot was the butt of a cruel joke told right in front of him, and the Healer was not emotionally strong nor a bearer of much self-esteem. The sub-Commander sighed, got up from where he was sitting on the floor, and strode over.

Rurut positioned himself between the Jiralhanae and Nunot, glaring up at the creatures with his beady black eyes. One of the Brutes, Sallius, cocked an eye-brow and looked over at Briareus, who repeated the gesture. The sub-Commander's eyes never left them, however, and he continued to glower. Nunot was still shaking and on the verge of breaking down from the verbal abuse, but Rurut stood strong and confident. After all, he had killed a Brute before, and there were always replacements for the hairy beasts.

"And what," rumbled Sallius, "do you expect to do, little Grunt?"

Rurut just stared, eliciting a chortle from the Brutes, until they each felt a two-fingered two-thumbed hand on their shoulder. They turned and saw that Balask had come up behind them and was gripping them tightly.

"Have I ever told you two the tale," he began slowly, "of the time I was visited in the night by a Brute assassin? In my very own quarters

in High Charity, no less. He came in using the 'skeleton-key' passcode, and was bearing the same weapon and set-up as you," he continued, and tugged on the bandoliers that each wore on their torsos. "Do you know how I defeated him? A simple Plasma Pistol shot to those grenades, and the force of the detonation of his own explosives tore him in half." He poked each in the back with a Plasma Pistol. "I wonder if such a trick would work twice" he looked at them both, with one eye on each of them, "or thrice?"

Sallius and Briareus simply huffed, but there was fear in their eyes and they made all haste to retreat from the scene. 'Zakamee watched them go, then turned his attention to the sub-Commander. "Are you all right?"

"I'm perfectly fine," Rurut replied, "and with some positive reinforcement, Nunot should be good to go very shortly." Balask nodded. He had been selected by Orin to be on the unit, though at first the other Elite had refused.

Now, however, his attention was drawn by frantic shouting coming from the edge of the dropship bay. Kasa 'Yonomee stood next to the force field, waving his hands and calling for everyone's attention. Covenant soldiers rushed across the hangar to see what he was so excited about; even Nunot temporarily forgot his despair and waddled over to examine the commotion.

As they gathered, they noticed the lightless void of Slipspace peeling back and revealing another void, but this one full of stars. Plus, a peculiar satellite: a single, silver moon floated nearby, suspended in the heavens. However, as the ship changed its alignment the moon drifted out of view.

"Are we there yet?" questioned a Jackal just before the combat alert began blaring throughout the ship. Immediately, the bay turned into a flurry of frenzied movement. Technicians ran through, pushing anti-gravity carts full of weapons and supplies and loaded them into the mini-gravity lifts generated by the Phantoms.

Rurut gestured for the entire team to join him, and they all crowded around him, though the Brutes remained a safe distance from Balask. Just as the sub-Commander was about to begin speaking, however, his communicator snapped to life.

"Rurut, this is Orin," his friend's deep voice said.

"What are your orders, Excellency?" the Grunt asked.

He heard a faint snort on the other end of the line. Orin hated it when he referred to him with an honorific. "We have arrived. Report to the Seraph hangars and get into a boarding craft. You and several other teams are being deployed to eliminate the orbital defense platforms."

A frown formed on the Unggoy's face. "Defense platforms?"

"Yes," the Ultra replied, "the humans have a strong presence here. It will not do to run into this blind. Take extra caution, and use antimatter bombs to destroy the stations. You shall strike the station known as _Athens._"

"Will you meet us there, Excellency?"

There was a lengthy pause. "No, I cannot. I must remain here and direct the assault."

"I see," the Grunt said. "Very well, Excellency. We shall do as you say." The communicator went silent, and Rurut turned to the collection of soldiers around him. "We have our orders," he said, beginning an improper mission briefing right in the hangar. "OrinÃ© has ordered that we board one of our boarding craft and assist in the destruction of the human orbital defense platforms."

"Defense platforms?" inquired Sesep incredulously.

"Yes," Rurut replied, "there's a strong presence here."

The Elites and Brutes of the unit gave an enthusiastic shout, alerting the entire dropship bay to this fact. All the warriors present gave elated cheers and the technicians uttered miserable groans, realizing that they would have to load more weapons and armor into the Phantoms.

"Let us go," Rurut said finally to the unit, and they took off at a quick trot towards the hangar on the other side of the ship that would hold the boarding crafts. As they went they passed by the armory to load up on weapons and supplies; each member of the unit was given a full complement of plasma grenades, as well as their pick of the firearms available. The Elites, as per usual, went for plasma rifles, while the Grunts helped themselves to the supply of pistols and Needlers.

"We shall need special ordinance," Rurut said to a passing technician. The Elite nodded, fetched a gravity trolley, and moved into the explosives room. When he returned, he had bound up a large oblong shape with several spikes all over it and a single, inactive control panel.

"This is the antimatter bomb that Commander 'Fulsamee has deemed necessary to eliminate the human platforms," he said, passing the trolley over to Kasa and Balask. For a moment the younger 'Yonomee struggled with the weight until Balask adjusted the antigravity output of the sled.

Once they reached the bay the quickly climbed into a boarding craft, the two Elites taking to the time to properly load and store the heavy ordinance. As soon as Nunot the Healer was aboard, he activated the plasma shielding on the end and radioed the pilot. "We're all set back here."

"Affirmative," the pilot returned. "We're in the second wave, estimated time to launch is two minutes." Nodding, Rurut settled himself into a magnetic hold-point and waited. It was the calm before the battle he enjoyed the most.

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OrinÃ© wanted to wail in sorrow for not being allowed to take place in the battle at hand, but he stayed his mandibles. It would not do

for him to enact such a display in front of the entire command crew. With his own team taken care of, now he had to focus on the rest of the forces aboard the ship, and in the entire fleet. It seemed overwhelming, but he had no choice.

He called up the information of the battle at hand, counting the personnel aboard each ship and how many boarding craft they had at their disposal. Turning to communications he had the officer rapidly send out his orders, sending waves of boarding craft and Seraph escorts.

Once that was finished, the Elite turned his attention back to his personal communicator unit. "Rurut, status report?" he questioned into the device.

"We are leaving the ship now, Excellency," came the reply.

"What of your equipment?"

"We have the bomb with us," Rurut affirmed. "Once we are aboard the station we will arm it."

OrinÃ© nodded. "Find the firing control station of the cannon and plant it there. Even if the bomb does not detonate as planned, at least we shall be sure it will prevent them from firing their weapon."

"Yes, Excellency. Kasa and Balask will transport the bomb to the appropriate area."

"What of the Brutes?" OrinÃ© was curious as to their detriment of mention.

There was a pause. "They did not come along, Excellency."

"Stop calling me that. We are of equal rank, as far as I am concerned. And why not?"

"They said that it would defile their very souls to set foot upon a human space installation."

OrinÃ© growled under his breath, but tried to hide his frustration from his subordinate. He and the Jiralhanae had never gotten along well at all, going all the way back to his days at Institution. That they would disobey not only his direct order but the directive of the Prophets drove a flaming knife of fury into his heart.

"Continue with your mission," he instructed. "Inform me of any developments. I must pay a visit to our furred companions."

The Grunt Ultra affirmed the order and terminated the connection. OrinÃ© excused himself from the bridge and stormed through the hallways. Those that saw the silver armor saluted, but those that paid attention to the expression on his face hurried to get out of his way. Finding the two AWOL Brutes was no issue; among the ships only a handful of Jiralhanae were assigned, and of them only Briareus and Sallius were on the Steadfast Knight.

When he found them, they were in their quarters laughing heartily at some jest. He stood in the doorway and glared at them until they took

notice of his presence. Their faces darkened, but Sallius was able to muster a husky greeting. "Excellency," he said curtly with a nod.

"Sallius, Briareus, why are you in your quarters?" OrinÃ© made no attempt to hide his rage. "We are currently in combat, and you are expected to operate with your team."

"The human stationâ€"

"â€"is our objective!" In a move he was inside the room, slamming his fist into the soldier's face. Sallius fell backwards, crying out in surprise and pain; Briareus rose to grab the Commander but the Elite turned and struck him as well, sending him tumbling to the deck. As Sallius cradled his face OrinÃ© placed a booted foot on Briareus, preventing him from rising. "I am no friend of the Jiralhanae," he seethed, "and I certainly do not believe my team somehow benefits from your inclusion. But His Eminence, the Prophet of Regret, has commanded that you work with my personal special operations squadron. If you are to be members of Blessed Unit, then so be it. But so long as you are, you _will _work with my unit." He released Briareus, who struggled to his feet. "Should you avoid duty again, I shall kill you for insubordination."

As he left the room he saw that a crowd had gathered outside the open doorway, mostly Sangheili, hoping to see a war hero injure two full-grown Jiralhanae. _They have gotten their wish. _"To your stations!" His cry shocked the grouping and they dispersed quickly, properly chastised. OrinÃ© made his way back to the bridge.

Once inside his father glanced back at him, but he shook his head subtly and Orita turned his attention back towards the forward monitors. The human fleet was beginning to muster its strength; an attack was imminent.

He again approached communications. "Status?"

"Excellency," the officer reported, "boarding teams have successfully reached the _Athens, Malta, _and _Cairo _stations." OrinÃ© nodded. It was a good start, but eventually boarding actions would have to be drawn against the other stations as well until a wide enough hole in their defenses was breached for the ships to begin direct bombardment.

But it was a start.

3. The Athens

Chapter 3: The Athens

Rurut the Grunt stepped over the corpses of humans in the hallway as he walked through the human defense station _Athens_. The human Marines had put up a good fight, but his unit was better equipped and more experienced; the human soldiers seemed to be getting younger and younger, in his opinion. Balask's expert wielding of his Plasma Rifles had cut down roughly two thirds of the humans before the Covenant had even left the boarding craft, and it was easy for everyone else to mop up the remainder.

He stepped into a confined metal space. The door hissed shut behind him and he found himself momentarily bewildered. The room was small and triangular. After a moment of searching, he located a button, and the elevator began to descend through the station. The little Grunt snorted in disdain: the humans had yet to learn how to manipulate gravity for their elevators, their reliance upon chemical reactions and all-too-fickle mechanical devices being primitive at best. _But they fight well enough, _he thought. _Why were they not invited to join the technological advancement of the Covenant, like we Unggoy or the smelly Jiralhanae?_ Their worlds held so many Forerunner treasures they could have earned the title "Guardians" or "Keepers."

With a lurch, Rurut arrived on the appropriate level and stepped off into the Super MAC loading chamber. Gazing up at the mechanism responsible for chambering the massive shells, he noticed it had halted mid-load; the strike team that OrinÃ© had deployed to the Control Center must have completed its task.

Rurut walked across the room and stopped in front of the massive window that gazed out onto the humans' home planet. The majority of the planet was still in darkness, revealing the criss-crossing network of lights that shone on the landmasses. Where there was light from Sol, the waters of the planet sparkled brilliant greys and blues, and the continents were breathtaking greens and browns, with the occasional ice-capped mountain. It was a beautiful spectacleâ€| and if it hadn't been the birthplace of the filthy human scum, Rurut just might have been sad when the time came to torch the surface into glass.

A scraping sound drew the sub-Commander's attention, and he glanced over at the source: Balask and Kasa were coming off another elevator and dragging the bomb. It was a large oblong shape, larger than the Grunt, and a dark shade of purple. It had spikes protruding from all angles, a feature built in so it could be pushed out of ships and get stuck to human vessels. It was definitely powerful, but also extremely heavy, and even the two Elites were struggling to get it into the room. At last, they managed to drag it up to the window. They paused to catch their breaths.

"Where are the others?" Rurut asked.

"Sesep and Opom doubled back to the boarding craft in order to guard it," Kasa said between breaths. "And Nunot is helping out another squad with their wounded. He will rejoin us at the craft."

Rurut nodded in approval at the plan, and looked out the window once more as Balask stepped up to the bomb, keyed a few commands into the blue holographic console on the top and set the timer. Suddenly, there was a rumble, and out in space one of the other platforms, the _Malta_, shuddered violently. It buckled, secondary explosions spanned its mass, and finally the entire thing combusted, sending debris spiraling out into space.

The Elites laughed mirthlessly, and the Grunt smiled. "Let's go, back to the boarding craft," he ordered, turning on his stubby heel. "We'll meet up with our unit, and then return to the _Steadfast Knight._" The Elites nodded and took off at a jog towards the elevator, but Rurut took his time.

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Things had become more complicated.

"What did you just say?" OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee asked over the communications line. On the other end was a Sangheili soldier stationed on the _Cairo_ station. Rurut had already reported his team's success and escaped the explosion of the _Athens_ by the time this communication had come through.

"I said the Demon is here, Excellency!" the warrior's frantic voice sounded. "He has been steadily making his way towards the bomb! He just wiped out an entire flight of Drones. He is very close!"

OrinÃ© uttered a heart-felt curse in his native tongue. "Send the order to evacuate the wounded and leave your most capable warriors as sentries around the explosive to ensure it is not able to deactivate the weapon!"

"Right away, Excellency!" the other Elite said, and cut the communications.

OrinÃ© sighed in exasperation. He was used to leading small attack units, but handling the entirety of the ground force assault on these platforms was proving to be quite a challenge. He enjoyed it, reveling in the ability to command so many troops at once, have so much authority, but it was wearing him out quickly. And the fight had barely begun.

He turned to the golden-armored elder Elite close by him. "Father, the Demon is aboard the _Cairo_. I have deployed the best warriors available to stop him, but I doubt that will be enough."

Orita nodded, closing his eyes and thinking. "We must assume the Cairo lost," he spoke. He opened his eyes and looked at the communications officer. "Open a channel to the Prophet of Regret." The officer nodded, manipulated the holographic panel in front of him, and the left viewscreen's view of the now-occurring space battle was replaced by the hierarch's holy visage.

"Excellency," the Ship Master reported, "two of the human defense platforms have been destroyed; the third most likely will not. While not optimally sized, the hole in their defenses should be enough to squeeze the carriers through one at a time."

The Prophet stroked his chin for a moment. "That will do, Ship Master. You and your son are to be commended for your leadership skills and your influence of others. We will move through the debris and get into the atmosphere; you will lead the fleet into direct combat with the human space forces."

"Of course, Excellency," Orita replied, and bowed. With that, the Prophet disappeared from the screen, and the Ship Master had the Grunt change to a fleet-wide communication. "Attention all ships! Advance forward and cover the Prophet as He enters the atmosphere of the human planet! Make sure those carriers get through!"

The elder 'Fulsamee turned to OrinÃ©. "You shall be needed on the

surface to direct the assault as the acting Battalion Master. We have no Phantoms to spare, so you will have to go by drop pod. May the Forerunners watch over you." OrinÃ© bowed and took his leave.

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The silver-armored Elite moved quickly through the halls of the _Steadfast Knight_, _en route to the armory. Rurut and the rest of his squad had landed on the Prophet of Regret's carrier and had gone down to the surface of the planet, and the two Brutes had gotten a ride to Earth on a Phantom, the beetle-like dropships only recently put at the disposal of the front-line troops. That left only OrinÃ© to find his way to the planet, and his plan was quite risky.

Walking into the armory, only a few soldiers spared the time to salute him. Even though his clean silver armor glinted nobly in the soft purple light and the Etching of Glory was clear and evident on his breast, the majority of the warriors were too busy preparing for battle. While the Prophet's orders were for the fleet to keep the orbital defenses busy and buy time for them to finish their task, the Covenant was still maintaining its assault on the platforms. A few Spec Ops teams had been called to the surface to assist the Prophet, and the infantry that had been on the Prophet's carrier had set up a defensive perimeter around the landing site, a city called "New Mombasa." Now OrinÃ© himself would descend to the planet's surface to issue orders from the temporary command base set up at the bottom of the gravity lift.

OrinÃ© carefully considered the work he would be doing. It was his responsibility, once down on the planet, to take command of all the infantry and Spec Ops teams and keep the humans busy and as far from the Prophet as possible.

He automatically picked up a Plasma Rifle and attached it to his magnetic thigh holster. A high rate of fire, plus being easily carried in one hand, made it a good all-around weapon. It was a very reliable sidearm.

Next he examined a Carbine, one of the Covenant's newest additions to its already-expansive arsenal. It seemed, at first, a bit old-fashioned in its single-shot design and its use of energized projectiles made it unfit for OrinÃ©'s taste. However, after spending many hours at the firing range of High Charitystruggling to master the weapon, he had finally realized its potential. The single-shot coupled with a two-times zoom made it quite capable of lethal shots from afar, but the slow rate of fire offset this a little. However, the projectiles, while more primitive than the superheated plasma launched from a Plasma Rifle and resembling the crystalline rounds of a Needler, were actually closer in relation to the highly-explosive projectiles launched from a Fuel Rod Cannon. The small green depleted-uranium "shell" could easily punch through a human's skull and destroy the brain quickly with near-silent accuracy. With a satisfied snort, OrinÃ© placed the weapon on his back.

After nabbing a satchel of plasma grenades, he located the last piece of hardware that he desired from the arsenal: an Energy Sword. It was an ancient marvel of the Elites, and in the Covenant it was reserved _only_ for the vaguely-reptilian warriors and defenders of the Sacred

Oath. It could slice through shields and armor with an almost perverse ease, allowing the wielder an almost legendary power and status on the battlefield. Of course, it was no good against ranged weapons, thus only Senior-ranking Elites such as OrinÃ© were allowed to wield them: they had the experience and skill to know when it was appropriate to use and when it wasn't. But he had to admit that holding even the deactivated hilt filled him with a feeling of invulnerability. He quickly attached the device to his belt and walked out of the armory.

An elevator ride later, OrinÃ© found himself on the lowest deck of the ship, the location of the drop pod launchers. As he stepped off the gravity-manipulation device, he was suddenly plunged into a swarm of activity: white-armored technicians and bulbous, floating Engineers rushed from place to place, prepping the first wave of pods to reach the surface. Normally, this much activity would be unnecessary, but what was about to happen was quite risky and required everything to be executed perfectly. The _Steadfast Knight_ was a considerable distance from the planet, with many ships and obstacles between it and the surface. The pods would have to be launched at incredibly high speed to close the distance and then slow just right so they didn't scream right through the atmosphere and slam too hard into the concrete cities and earthen fields. Only Elites were allowed to ride in drop-pods; their bodies were the only proven to be able to handle the strain of gravity, and their fearless fanaticism and devotion reinforced their psyche against the possibility of crashing into debris and exploding.

Quickly the Spec Ops Commander found his way to a vacant pod and settled himself inside. Tactically-placed gel warped and molded to his shape, giving him comfort and security at the same time. As soon as he was all the way in the pod, a holographic panel lit up and displayed the status of his pod and the rest of the first wave. An Engineer and two technician Grunts moved up to the pod and fit the lid on it, but soft blue lights gave proper illumination within.

A two-minute wait later, a message flashed across the internal screen:

"All pods ready. First wave deploying immediately."

Suddenly the insertion craft lurched and was propelled rapidly and violently down the launch-tube, exploding into space and rocketing towards the planet. OrinÃ© fought the feeling that was pulling at his stomach and his eyes, evaded the blackness that wanted to swallow him up and plunge him into unconsciousness. Instead, he focused on the panel and observed the status of the rest of the first wave of pods. Almost immediately, a couple of the icons representing other pods turned red and vanished, indicating they had struck something and exploded. The Covenant soldier said a quick prayer, both for their now-free souls and for better luck than they.

The pods neared the Earth, flying straight through several walls of fire generated by the humans' Longswords with little more than a scratch, attributing to the strength and durability of the Covenant design. Three more winked out as they crashed into a passing human battleship, but the remaining twelve pods made it to the atmosphere with little other excitement.

OrinÃ© suddenly became aware of a flashing light on the panel,

alerting him that someone was trying to reach him on the communications network. He shifted slightly, activating the symbol and opening a channel. Rurut's diminutive face appeared in sharp focus.

"Excellency," he said.

"Rurut? Why are you calling me?"

"We have been rerouted, Excellency," the Unggoy said. "The Prophet has asked for our presence on the surface. He has need of our unit for his excavation.

"I am transmitting the landing coordinates to your pod. You will land just inside our defense perimeter around the carrier. I will meet you when you arrive." The view of his friend vanished, replaced once again by the panel, and he felt the course of his craft change slightly as he hit the outer edges of the atmosphere. Gravity once again let its familiar tug be known to the soldier, but he ignored it, focusing instead on where the pod was going. Small retro-boosters outside fired, constantly adjusting his angle to get him right on target, and OrinÃ© felt them do their job.

Glancing at the panel again, he noted his ETA was just under a minute. It also alerted him that the other pods in the wave were breaking off and leaving sensor range, so the telemetry that he received wouldn't be updated for longer periods of time. He hardly acknowledged the message, a feeling of apathy for those soldiers washing over him. He only wanted to see his own team.

Suddenly, however, the pod was jarred with explosive force. All sense of direction fled the vulnerable Elite Ultra as his tomb-like pod entered an uncontrollable spin. Fighting to simply take a breath, OrinÃ© was totally at the mercy of the wayward vehicle; the holographic panel fizzed and winked out of existence, leaving him struck blind as well as dumb. For a moment there was weightlessness in his chest as he found a moment of perfect free-fall, but that fleeting peace was taken quickly as he was slammed first into the hatch and then back into his seat.

He cursed his horrible luck.

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Rurut had been keeping an eye on the inbound pod that held his commander when he heard a distant clap, and the telemetry disappeared from the small portable Lumidex he had been holding. Looking up he saw a dissipating cloud of black smoke and a small object falling uncontrolled towards the surface, behind the skyline of the human city.

For a moment he didn't want to believe it, but he knew what he had just seen: OrinÃ© had been shot down. Frantically he tried to reestablish contact with the pod, but it was no use. Frustrated, he threw the Lumidex down hard against the concrete streets of the planet.

"Are you coming?" The deep voice caused Rurut to look over his

shoulder; Balask stood there, holding a Carbine in his hands and with a human shotgun over his shoulder.

"No," he responded, turning to look back at where Orin's pod had been moments before. "I think I will be needed up here." The Elite behind him nodded and turned around, marching back to the waiting group. A Scarab walker hovered over them, charging its main cannon. Once the process was finished it released a concentrated beam of plasma straight into the ground, burrowing through hundreds of feet of metal, rock, and earth.

The Scarab walkers had originally been intended as mining vehicles, using intense amounts of plasma to dig deep into the surface of a planet. However, during the battle of the human world Harvest, a chance encounter proved their effectiveness as a weapons platform. Since then, all models of Scarabs produced were equipped with anti-air defense weapons and given enough space to transport troops. Each was manned by a crew of six: three Grunts operated as technicians, and there were two Elite Major pilots and one Elite Ultra captain.

Again the walking tank fired, and Rurut felt the heat wash over him. As far as he understood it, the Prophet of Regret had detected a massive Forerunner structure buried beneath the city, and he wished to get access to it; he believed it held something intensely valuable. Rurut didn't know what to believe, but with Orin down, it would be his job to be present in the command center, even though his orders would be largely ignored.

After all, he was simply an Unggoy.

What could he possibly do?

4. Hierarchy

Chapter 4: Hierarchy

On its own, High Charity would have been considered one of the holiest locations within the Covenant: simply its level of access to Forerunner artifacts, realms of knowledge and data, and to those religious experts who studied them would have been enough to catapult it onto a level that rivaled not only the Forerunner installations scattered throughout the galaxy but the very Halos themselves.

But it was the presence of the greatest artifact in the known universe that made it the absolute Mecca of the Covenant: the Forerunner Dreadnought, a fourteen kilometer-tall vessel left behind on the homeworld of the San 'Shyuum, who would revere the craft and later form the Covenant with the Sangheili, trading their racial name for the title of "Prophets." The ship itself was situated in the exact center of High Charity, visible from all locations and oriented directly beneath the large glowing disc that acted as the city's de facto sun. As the city was in constant motion, traveling through space from religious site to religious site, it had no sun, and therefore had need of the artificial one set into the massive dome that protected the metropolis within.

It was this very ship that Yarna 'Orgalmee's domicile looked upon, the window of his apartment gazing out over the city from its vantage

point in the eleventh tower. He could look upon its hallowed frame every morning when he awoke, and reflect upon its glory at night as he slept. Truly it was a sight to behold.

The warrior in question was sitting at his desk in said domicile, allowing his mind to wander when he was supposed to be reading over the latest equipment roster. The data scrolled over the holographic surface on his desk, but his eyes continued to be drawn to a holographic still resting on the edge of his workspace. It displayed two forms, one tall and lanky and the other small and stunted: his good friends, OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee and Rurut the Grunt. They had served with him on Halo and survived its horrors together.

_Haloâ€| _The name brought back bittersweet memories. The Flood certainly spoiled everything, having become unleashed and decimating the Covenant forces on the ring. High Charity was currently in synchronous orbit with the ruins of the Sacred Ring around the gas giant Threshold. The flaming, shattered remains of the once great Halo floated in space, slowly spinning and throwing its atmosphere away to coil about it lazily in the hard vacuum.

He sighed and sat back in his chair. He almost regretted taking the posting as one of the Prophets' Honor Guards, seeing as how he was withdrawn from the front lines. Technically speaking, he held the rank of Elite Zealot, a rank which his own father had achieved before becoming a member of the High Council. Now, though, the only combat he knew was in drills and sparring, and in both of which lethal force wasn't authorized. If someone happened to die there was indeed not much in the way of consequences, but it would still be a hassle to complete the paperwork.

Groaning aloud he leaned forward again. Paperwork: that was something he suddenly had much more of, and he lacked the motivation to complete it all. Risking a glance at the opposite wall, he looked at the armor that was suspended in a gravity field next to his bed. It was a deep crimson, like the color and shade of human blood, but at the same time it was very metallic and shiny. He kept it in impeccable condition. There were ornate decorations all over it too; they even served a function: the glowing orange flashes and swoops all over the body and helmet added some power to the shield generators, giving the Honor Guard more protection and a better opportunity to protect the Prophets and Councilors.

With a growl, Yarna shook his head. _I must focus, _he thought, retraining his eyes on the data in front of him. _If I were on the battlefield my mind would be sharp as a razor's edge. But now, in the world of politics, I cannot claim the same yet._

A chime sounded in his room. At first he began to stand, thinking it to be the warning that his shift was near, but he quickly realized it was simply the door alert, informing him there was a soul beyond the closed portal that desired access. With a grumble he sat back down.

"Enter," he called out, and the door hummed and slid apart. He looked over and saw that a Brute had sauntered up to his quarters and was now leaning on the doorway looking smug. He recognized him, too: Jobrinus, one who didn't mind pestering the Honor Guard even while they were on duty. He was beaten for it relentlessly; the scars criss-crossing his face attested to it.

Yarna growled. "What do you want?"

"Just checking in," Jobrinus sneered. "I assume you heard about the trial?"

A dark feeling settled over Yarna's mind. The trial this morning had been based on an accusation of heresy, but towards an unusual recipient: the Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice. He had been in command when the Demon had succeeded in destroying Halo, and now bore responsibility for the loss. The punishment was severe as usual for heresy, but it had a much darker overtone. Not only was he answering for his negligence but also for compromising the salvation of all those in the Covenant.

The legend of the Sacred Rings stated that only through the Halos could the loyal and devout species of the Covenant begin the Great Journey, but by allowing the ring to be destroyed he endangered the entire Journey. Thus, after the usual public torture session (which had gathered a larger crowd than any heresy trial before it), the shamed Elite had been dragged off to the Hierarchs to await execution.

However, Yarna did not blame the Supreme Commander for the loss of Halo. He had been one of the few to survive, and had seen the danger the Parasite presented; he understood that the Commander had done right by focusing his attention on the Flood first and the pitiful human forces second. Even the Sangheili race overall knew that the Commander had done his best, and that this degree of torture was unnecessary; the legend stated clearly that there were _seven _Sacred Rings, and only one needed to be lit to begin the Great Journey.

But the Covenant had needed a martyr, so they had created one where there was only dedication to duty. Yarna could not voice his disagreement, though, and neither could anyone who felt similarly. The Hierarchs and the High Council had spoken, and it was to be that the Sangheili warrior would be executed.

Yarna had found it strange, though, that the Supreme Commander had reminded him faintly of OrinÃ©.

"How could I not? I was overlooking the entire scene."

The Brute shook his head as if he were chiding himself. "Ah, of course. How could I forget you were on duty?"

"Especially when you pestered me and insulted my race throughout."

"Yes, especially."

The Elite swiveled in his chair to face the ape-like creature. "Is there a point to this, Jobrinus?" Revulsion swept through his soul even as the Brute smiled.

"I merely wished to congratulate your race," Jobrinus said, trying his best to look sincere. "After all, it was quite a feat that Fleet Master achieved: never in recorded history has a Forerunner artifact of such size and splendor been destroyed."

Suddenly Yarna was out of his chair and had the monster by his throat. He slammed the furry body against the wall, forcing a yelp and gurgle of surprise out of the offending creature. "Not another word, you foul beast!" the Elite hissed, tightening his grip. "It was not the fault of my race or that martyred warrior! The failure can only be attributed to the release of the Parasite, nothing more." Growling, he slammed the other warrior's head into the wall before releasing him to slide to the floor. "If you come to my quarters again, I will not hesitate to kill you."

Jobrinus choked out a garbled reply, but he quickly righted himself and hurried out the door. Despite the severity of the situation, Yarna couldn't help but smile. At least he still had it in him to fight, even if the situation wasn't the same. Returning to his desk, he realized that he was in the right mind to finish the work in front of him.

_Perhaps I should abuse __Jobrinus__ more often_, he thought wistfully before going to work.

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After a while of working, Yarna decided it would be a good idea to stretch his legs. Heaving himself out of his chair, he did a rapid exercise regimen and exited his chambers. He wandered the hallways of High Charity for a little while before finding his way to the Forums, emerging in a grand domed structure, easily over two thousand square feet. Inside were throngs of species, each grouping together to discuss the recent political and social developments of the city.

Pushing his way through the crowd towards a gathering of other Elites, the he joined with his brethren and listened in on the conversation. Apparently something big had happened while he was cooped up in his room.

"Impossible!" one Sangheili exclaimed, his eyes wide with wonder and bewilderment.

"I speak the truth," insisted another, "I saw him leaving the Mausoleum wearing the sacred armor. A new Arbiter has been selected!"

Murmurs spread rapidly through the gathering, even spreading into some of the other crowds. A new Arbiter had serious repercussions: the sacred warriors of the Sangheili were only called during times of great crisis. Clad in ancient and ceremonial armor, these soldiers were selected from the very best, chosen to be religious leaders to rally the Covenant against a great foe.

Yarna had been aware of a rising number of Heretics, a faction that had recently split away. The division had been sudden and without warning, leaving even the Hierarchs caught flat-footed in their wake, though Yarna believed their numbers to be too small to cause an actual panic; only a relative few had been drawn by the heretical ramblings of their leader, Sesa 'Refumee. But calling Arbiter, however, meant the Hierarchs considered it a severe enough problem to warrant the highest kind of attention.

There was, however, another repercussion to the calling of an Arbiter, one entirely too personal for Yarna. His own grandfather had been called, following the assassination of one of the Prophets in his own time. Though widely loved by the people and seen as a true leader, he had been given his own mission: to eliminate the Yanme'e Queen to bring the ongoing conflict with the Drones to an end. He accomplished it, at the cost of his life. Yarna had never known his grandfather; even his own father had been too young to remember with any great detail, though what memories he had were incredibly fond and inspired the young Sangheili so much that he often believed the spirit of his grandfather was watching over always.

The crowd continued to yell its divided opinions, some of disbelief and others of joy and enthusiasm, until a deep voice bellowed over all others. Rapidly that entire area of the Forum fell into silence, all turning to regard the newcomer. He was clad in pearlescent white armor and stood tall and proud, slightly more so than most Sangheili. Beneath his dermo-suit lay rippling, toned muscles, forged from hours and hours of constant combat. His eyes were an uncommon green, shining forth like two emeralds from beneath the rim of his helmet. In fact, he would have been considered irresistibly attractive were it not for a horrible facial disfiguration: his two left mandibles had been gruesomely and undoubtedly painfully ripped off. Left behind were two nubs that twitched as the Sangheili spoke.

Yet at a distance and even despite the injury, Yarna still recognized the warrior's face: Rtas 'Vadumee. Suddenly memories of Institution came forth, of sitting at a table in the mess hall and joking about the Jiralhanae, how foul and cruel they were. They had met through OrinÃ©, Yarna remembered; they had even been in the same crÃ©che sent to Jisako.

"Calm yourselves," Rtas said as he began to make his way through the crowd. Those before him parted of their own volition, either out of respect for his rank of Elite Ultra or simple shock at his damaged face. "The acquisition of a new Arbiter is to be expected. The destruction of Halo has caused a panic in the lower races, and it is necessary to rally them to prevent unrest."

"Has he been given his mission yet?"

Rtas glared in the direction of the voice, green eyes narrowing into slits. "I am not at liberty to say. But rest assured: the Prophets shall put this warrior to good use."

Nods of approval passed through the crowd, and gradually they dispersed into other areas, offering news and opinions to other species of the Covenant. Yarna approached Rtas, catching his eye. The white-armored Sangheili cocked his head curiously.

"Do I know you?"

Yarna nodded. "Yes, we two were cadets in Institution, commenced at the same time." He smiled. "I believe we know each other through our mutual friend, OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee?"

Recognition lit the Commander's eyes from behind. "Ah yes! I remember you now." He scrutinized the younger Elite. "You have not changed radically, I see, butâ€¦" For a moment his eyes lingered on the

breast of Yarna's dermo-suit. "You bear not only the sigil of the Honor Guard, but the Etching of Glory. Only four individuals received itâ€¦ you were one of the survivors?"

"Yes, I was," Yarna replied, unconsciously puffing out his chest. "Myself and OrinÃ© both survived the destruction of the Sacred Ring."

Rtas nodded, and fortunately did not pursue the subject further. The memories of Halo were still far too recent and painful for him to recall with any ease, and if the rumors were to be believed, the Commander had faced the Parasite as well, though in a much different climate.

"Was there something you wanted?"

His deep voice brought Yarna out of his momentary stupor. "Yes, actually," he began. "I wished to knowâ€¦ have you met the Arbiter?"

The Elite Ultra hesitated. "Not personally," he finally said, "but I have been introduced to him by the Hierarchs."

"What is he like?"

Rtas clicked his mandibles, the Sangheili equivalent of a shrug. "Quiet, withdrawnâ€¦ everything you expect such a warrior to be."

Everything you might expect, Yarna thought bitterly. He nodded his farewell and took his leave, losing himself in the Forums. He drifted from group to group, listening in on a handful of conversations before finally wandering his way from the building altogether. Gradually he made his way back to his apartment, sitting down at his desk and gazing at the holographic image of his two departed friends. The shock was just sinking in; another Arbiter. One who was quiet and withdrawn. Butâ€¦ but he was supposed to be a beacon to the people, an icon of the Covenant's power. Those who were chosen were pure and holy, examples selected for their devotion and knowledge.

Weren't they?

Yarna started in his seat as a chime cut through the stillness of his room. He released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. With a forlorn look at the chronometer he realized it was time for the start of his guard shift.

5. Earth

Chapter 5: Earth

OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee's own groan brought him out of his unconscious stupor. Instinctively he took a breath, but it was shallow, labored, and filled his lung with an acrid smell. He coughed hard and attempted to bring his hand up to his mouth but it would not budge. Finally opening his eyes he saw why: the pod he had been in was seriously dented inwards. Part of it was likely from the shell impact, but the rest was no doubt the result of a very rough

crash-landing. The deformed door was pressing into his chest, restricting his breathing and pinning his right arm down. His left still had mobility.

Cautiously he moved his legs. Neither was broken and both had plenty of room. Doing a quick calculation of force in his head he kicked as hard as he could with both hooves; the door creaked its pitiful answer to his efforts but held fast. Once more he tried and this time loosened the metal enough that he could shove with his left hand and get it all the way open. Unsteadily he pulled himself from his pod and to his feet. He was in a courtyard, he realized, enclosed on all sides by buildings. All around was the evidence of his difficult landing: broken windows, dented walls, and his supplies strewn about around him. Apparently he had ricocheted around the inner buildings before finally coming to a rest near a tattered awning.

"Damn," he swore, and began searching his pod and the surrounding area for his weapons and ammunition. His sword was still strapped to his leg and the satchel of grenades was right where he had left it; everything else was spread out. To his dismay, his pistol had been damaged in the crash and was unserviceable, leaving him only with his trusty Plasma Rifle and the tricky Carbine.

He shouldered the latter and fixed a few extra cartridges to his armor at the magnetic hold-points, and then brought up his Plasma Rifle. Its battery hadn't been damaged. _Thank the Gods for small mercies_, he thought.

However, a glance through the glass windowed lobby of the nearest building sucked any feeling of mercy from his mind: one of the human battle-tanks was rolling past, flanked by their Warthogs and several Marines on foot. Though he hadn't much observed it since his days in Institution, OrinÃ© knew that to be one of their more relaxed formations.

_I'm behind the enemy's lines, _he thought, moving quickly into the shadows and activating his active camouflage. The light around him bent and warped, giving him near-total invisibility. _The Prophet is waiting for me; I must make my way to Him and complete whatever task has been left to me._

He needed to radio his position and condition in. Waiting until the humans seemed to be out of range, he keyed up the Covenant Battle Net. "Battalion Commander OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee to any allies." A moment later, Rurut's shrill voice filled his ears.

"Excellency!" his comrade asked excitedly, "Where are you?"

"Stop that," OrinÃ© replied. "My pod was knocked off-course; I'm currently trapped behind human lines. It will take some time for me to reach the carrier now."

There was muffled talking on the other end of the channel before Rurut's voice returned in clarity. "OrinÃ©, where in the city are you?"

"It seems to be older than the area where the carrier is," he said, looking all around him. "The architecture is much more ancient than the human cities I have seen so far... ugh, and there are filthy human clothes hanging from lines suspended above the street."

"The ancient part of the city, then."

"Is there any support you can send me?"

"No, Excellency. The humans have that part of town completely under their control at the moment. I'm afraid you'll have to find your own way out of there." OrinÃ© grumbled but sent an affirmative signal before clicking off the transmitter. Though he wanted to explore options, he didn't want to risk detection, especially this far behind human lines.

The city was clearly prepared for a conflict. He was not sure how, but either they had anticipated the Covenant's arrival or simply had marvelous reaction time. Barricades had been raised, civilians had already started to evacuate, and their military was dug in and prepared to fight.

OrinÃ© realized that they were observant as well when a small squad of Marines came out of an alleyway to check the crash site of the pod. They fanned out, covering the entire area with their rifles and forcing OrinÃ© to stand as still as he could manage. A sergeant moved forward and toed some of the wreckage.

"Holy hell," he muttered. "We smoked this one good."

"Sarge," a corporal spoke up, moving a bit closer to the sergeant, "there's no body. Squid-lips must still be around here somewhere."

The sergeant nodded. "Right. Check the surrounding buildings and make sure the bastard hasn't gone into hiding to lick his wounds; the last thing we need is a coordinated attack from _behind._" The corporal saluted and began to give orders to the Marines. Silently and with great care, the cloaked Elite moved slowly and steadily down an adjacent alley and out into the open.

The Elite squinted slightly in the bright sunlight, but continued to make his way along the line of buildings that stood beside the road. Every so often a military vehicle would roar by carrying armed personnel and OrinÃ© would freeze, fearing that he may be discovered, but the active camouflage held out. For the moment, he realized, he was safe to observe.

At one point he came across a human dropship that had landed in the street. Three humans had exited the craft and were repairing a damaged external electrical conduit. He sidled up the craft, cautious because he feared that the electrical field might disrupt his camouflage, and examined their equipment. Sullenly, he discovered that he did not recognize the weapons each of them carried; one seemed distantly similar to an MA5B Assault Rifle and the other a different design of their sidearm-type weapons, but the third was completely foreign to him. He would have to ask the intelligence units for an updated dossier on human weapons.

Further down the street, several human civilians were standing grouped together. At first OrinÃ© only sneered and attempted to bypass them, but paused when he noticed that they carried older human weapons. Despite their obvious lack of armor and military discipline, each wore a hardened scowl on his or her face as they loaded up and

prepared to hunker down for the conflict.

_These people who cannot fight, _OrinÃ© mused, _have decided to throw their lives away? Where is the sense? _Perhaps, he reasoned, that the human defense of their home world was so lacking that they did not have the necessary amount of regularly trained personnel and required the help of their own civilians. If this were the case, the battle for this miserable little planet would be over quickly.

Only a short while later OrinÃ© found an aid station with freshly wounded soldiers.

_I must be close to the fighting, _he thought, maneuvering around a group of medics carrying an injured soldier on a stretcher. _I can soon link up with our forces and find a quicker way to the Prophet._

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"This whole thing is becoming difficult," muttered Rurut as he gazed over the holographic charts. They showed the troop deployment and strength of the Covenant forces and the relative position of the human Marines. While the Covenant had superior weapons and could ask for aerial bombardments from the carrier that hovered above the city, the humans seemed to know what they were doing. Slowly the invaders were being boxed in on all sides.

_If OrinÃ© was here, he'd know what to do, _the Grunt thought bitterly. The Special Operations sub-Commander was doing his best but it wasn't enough, and if the Prophet's ill-conceived search for whatever it was he wanted was interrupted there would certainly be hell to pay.

Out of the general chaos of the deployment area around the gravity lift walked Kasa 'Yonomee, one of the Elites in OrinÃ©'s new lance. He regarded the hologram gravely before turning to Rurut.

"Any report from our Commander yet?" he asked.

Rurut shook his head. "Not since he reported moving up directly behind a combat line of humans."

Kasa looked sullen. "I hope he is all right."

The Grunt regarded the young Elite before him. Kasa had a great deal of admiration for OrinÃ©, one garnered through watching the ceremony where he had received the Etching of Glory and observing recovered holo-records of the older Elite's battles. When he had heard which unit he was being assigned to, Kasa nearly did a dance for joy. Now his idol's life was in danger.

Sighing, the diminutive creature looked back at the map. OrinÃ© was his friend, too, and he feared for his safety; yet the Commander could take care of himself.

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OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee continued to sneak his way through the human lines, avoiding combat patrols where he could and instead sneaking through poorly defended or populated areas. None of the humans, Marine or otherwise, was able to discern that he was there; a few domesticated four-legged animals realized his location, but either weren't interested or were too scared to approach him other than make noise in his direction, an action that got them quickly quieted by their human masters.

Now, however, he had run into some trouble: he had come across a bridge leading to the Covenant base of operations, but the Marines had a strong perimeter around his end. Squadrons of Ghosts and Banshees would rush their positions, but each time the Covenant would be forced back by heavy fire. Wraiths would occasionally lob plasma mortars, but they fell far too short and the tanks themselves couldn't get any closer or else they would come in range of the human weapons.

_How can I get across? _The Elite peered over a nearby edge and looked into the murky water below. He was a good swimmer, but not _that _good. With his active camouflage still engaged he might be able to simply walk across.

The Spec Ops Commander slipped past a small group of human soldiers and began to walk along the length of the suspension bridge. Demolished and abandoned human vehicles dotted the road, some overturned from blasts and others merely resting where the occupants had abandoned them.

For a moment he considered using his radio to announce his approach, but reconsidered. To send a signal now would risk the humans discovering his position, and then they could bombard the structure. So in radio silence he trudged along.

Reaching the peak of the bridge, he glanced down the gentle slope of metal and concrete to see a gathering force of Covenant armor. Several Ghosts and Wraiths waited at the front of the line, with a squadron of Banshees waiting on the ground behind and a contingent of infantry troops made up of Grunts and Jackals. OrinÃ© quickened his pace down the bridge, deactivating his cloak as he went.

Several of the Covenant murmured to each other as they saw a silver-armored Elite just appear in front of them, but as he neared a gold-armored Field Master climbed out of a Wraith and waved to him.

"Who goes there?" he asked. OrinÃ© halted.

"I am the Commander in charge of planet-side operations here," the Spec Ops Elite replied. "What is going on?"

The Field Master straightened and saluted. "Excellency! We are about to rush the human defensive position in an attempt to overwhelm the filthy creatures and continue to gain a foothold in the city."

OrinÃ© shook his head. How had so many headstrong Sangheili found leadership positions? "A foolish idea. They are dug in too deep for such an attack to work. Request that some of the Super Shades we have

landed throughout the city begin a bombardment of the area, and once that has ceased you should send the wave of Banshees and Ghosts to clean up. Keep the Wraiths back here to strike them from a distance." He activated the Battle Net and keyed Rurut's frequency. "Rurut, what is the status of the Scarabs that the Prophet has on his ship?"

The radio crackled slightly. "Two have been deployed, Excellency," the Grunt replied, "both in the section the humans call Old Mombasa. They are making their way through the human lines towards the carrier. Shall I send them orders to change tactics?"

"Negative," OrinÃ© ordered. "Tell them to continue on their course, but make sure they go over the bridge and eradicate the humans there." He turned back to the Field Master. "Here are your orders: hold this end of the bridge against any counterattack that they may make."

The gold-armored Elite looked a little upset that he wouldn't be allowed to charge valiantly and into battle, but nonetheless saluted. "Yes, Excellency! As you command!"

As the soldiers rushed around him, OrinÃ© felt relaxation spread throughout his body. _This _was what he enjoyed, the feeling of being in command and right on the battlefield. An Elite Major hurried past him, but he reached out his arm to catch his shoulder.

"Major," OrinÃ© said. "See what you can do about arranging transport for me to the Prophet of Regret's carrier. I'm needed there."

6. Map to the Heavens

Chapter 6: Map to the Heavens

OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee slipped out of the side-seat on the Spectre, his hooved feet clopping on the ground as he made his way to the command post. The Covenant's presence on the planet so far hinged on this base set up underneath the carrier. It was their foothold and their only place of strength; even then it was still quite vulnerable.

Striding into the primary center, Covenant soldiers saw the color of his scuffed armor and hurried out of his path but didn't go out of their own way to display the proper respect. It didn't bother him; there were more important things to worry about.

He came up behind Rurut, who was still concentrating on the map before him.

"Where do we stand?" the Elite asked. Rurut jumped and turned around.

"Not in a good way, Excellency," he said. OrinÃ© scowled and looked past the Unggoy. Across the map he could see the indicators of the Covenant's defensive positions. An overlay broadcast from the Luminary on the carrier revealed the humans as well, but mixed in among them were civilians attempting to flee or standing their ground. OrinÃ© had no idea which group was which.

After a moment of consideration, he began to give orders. "Pull all

soldiers out of second and third sectors immediately and get them back to the sixth sector, wounded to be transferred onto the carrier. Move the armor division that's idle here to the defense line _here, _and send the Banshees and Phantoms to cover the Super Shades on these beaches. Have they reported their status yet?"

A Jackal piped in. "They say they are running low on troops, Excellency."

OrinÃ© nodded. "Tell the carrier to send a wave of pods to that location. Where are the Scarabs?"

"One is encountering heavy resistance in the fifth sector, Excellency," Rurut reported. "The other is moving relatively unimpeded towards the bridge." The Spec Ops Commander nodded his head, apparently satisfied with the information.

"Where is my team?"

"The Prophet of Regret ordered them and all Special Operations teams to enter an underground vault. His Holiness believes there is a vital Forerunner artifact within." Rurut touched a button on a Lumidex and the floating screen rapidly cycled until it paused over a transmission. "They have been giving reports every ten minutes, Excellency. We have them all logged here." OrinÃ© reached over and slid the display in front of him, pausing only long enough to give his Grunt friend a sharp look for using an honorific.

OrinÃ© felt quite displeased. His team was a finely honed weapon, deployed against the enemy in order to cripple and demoralize them, not a team of Inquisitors. Why were the scholars and scientists not descending into the structure? What did the Prophet fear so much that he would redirect all Special Operations lances to descend into a hidden Forerunner structure?

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The strange material almost seemed to glow, though Kasa 'Yonomee knew that was impossible: aside from their own portable lights there was no source of illumination. Yet Forerunner architecture had always been enigmatic and inexplicable in its design and function, and many of the Covenant scientists marveled at its mere existence, let alone the deeper and more mysterious properties of the materials their Lords had used.

There was only one thing that Kasa marveled at now, however: why was there a Forerunner complex on the humans' home world? It had been hidden under layers of concrete, steel, and soil and required a sustained orbital strike from the carrier's pulse laser to access it. Usually the job would have been completed in more time and done so with more care, but the Prophet of Regret was rushed. He had insufficient troops to hold off the human counterattack indefinitely.

Now they were in the structure of their Gods, hidden beneath the filthy human city. They walked a long hallway: the Special Ops team, deemed Blessed Unit for this mission, and the two Brutes assigned by the Prophet comprised the main body while a pair of Hunters, one in

front and the other in back, offered heavy support. The two blue-armored behemoths seemed agitated, which in turn made Kasa nervous. The Lekgolo hated being separated from their Bond Brothers even if only by a few meters.

The acting team commander, Balask 'Zakamee, hummed a battle hymn as he trudged along ahead of Kasa. The black-clad Elite held a plasma rifle in his hands but a human shotgun slung over his shoulder. Quickening his pace to catch up, the younger warrior had to satisfy his curiosity.

"Excellency," he said, and Balask cast a quick glance in his direction. "Why do you carry that human weapon with you? Are not their devices ineffective and blasphemous?"

Grunting, 'Zakamee placed the plasma rifle on a hold-point on his armor and unslung the shotgun from his shoulder. He hefted the weapon in his hands, testing the weight and grip for the hundredth time. "Blasphemous, perhaps," he began, "but ineffective? Certainly not." He pointed it straight ahead at the exposed orange skin of the Hunter ahead, but the massive tank of a beast was oblivious. "This weapon has consistently outperformed any Covenant weapon in close quarters, and our scientists are even now researching how to reverse-engineer it." He put the weapon back over his shoulder and grabbed his rifle again. "Human weapons technology is very interesting, even if largely primitive. They do not use or shape energy for any sort of offensive or defensive purposes, instead utilizing solid projectiles and launching them at high speeds. It's kind of like throwing a rock really, really fast. That Carbine you're holdingâ€" he nodded towards young Kasa's weapon, "â€"is our first weapon to parallel the humans'."

Kasa didn't say anything, instead just dropping back to his place in line. Behind him was Sesep, carrying his Fuel Rod Gun, followed by Nunot, the medic, and Opom, who clutched his precious Needler. The two Brutes filled the end of the line in front of the other Hunter.

A moment later, the Hunter in the lead stopped and made a loud grunting noise. Balask strode up to stand next to it. "What is it?" the black-clad Elite asked, and the Hunter made a low rumbling sound; Kasa couldn't hear what it was saying. Balask nodded and activated his radio.

"Blessed Unit here," he said, staring back over the heads of the rest of the team and nodding at the other Hunter. It turned its back to the group to face down the hallway, raising its shield and its gun in a defensive move. "Our lead Hunter claims to smell something far down the hall. Orders?"

There was a moment before the Prophet of Regret's voice came to them: "What does it smell?"

The Elite paused, considering what the Hunter had told him. "It smells... Forerunner."

"Continue down your path," Regret ordered, "Angelic and Solemn Units will rendezvous with you further into the structure." Balask said some meaningless farewell and turned his attention to the team.

"Keep going!" he roared, and as they continued forward he turned his radio to another frequency in order to deliver his report to Rurut. As he did that, Sesep moved up to Kasa and tugged intently on his cuff armor.

"Kasa," he squeaked, "the Brutes are pestering us and the Hunter does nothing."

"I do not have authority," Kasa whispered back. "Ask Balask to help you."

Sesep nodded but did not move forward, instead content to just walk beside the young Elite. After a moment, he spoke again: "What do you think the Prophet of Regret wants us to find?"

"A Forerunner artifact, I would imagine," Kasa replied, but before he could speculate further Balask spoke up.

"Noble Regret wishes us to locate a very special device," the acting team leader spoke. "It is called the Map to the Heavens."

"What does it do?" Kasa inquired.

Balask shrugged. "It is not my place to know. Leave that to the Inquisitors."

They continued their march downward in silence.

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There was a thunderous _clap_ and the ground shook so hard that OrinÃ© was knocked off his feet, his shields and the holographic combat map flickering in sympathy with the explosion. Quickly leaping back up, he surveyed the inside of the command post: everyone had been knocked down and a couple of communication rigs were squealing, but there didn't seem to be any permanent damage.

Outside there was a great deal of yelling, causing the Elite Ultra to hazard a look: a large crater marked where a human artillery shell had landed in the middle of the camp, destroying a small supply cache and the two Shadow transport craft that had been unloading it. Soldiers ran to and fro, some trying to put out fires and others seeking cover from the impending barrage. Two Unggoy lay motionless only a scant two meters from the blast site.

Rurut, who had managed to right himself and scurry over to his comrade, gazed out at the destruction as well. "Do they have us zeroed?" he whispered.

OrinÃ© waited a full minute in silence before answering. "No," he looked up at the belly of the carrier hovering above them. "It must have been a lucky shot." Somehow the incoming shell must have slipped past the carrier's covering fire. Though unnerving, OrinÃ© knew that it happened occasionally. He turned back to the holographic table, ignoring the nervous looks of his subordinates, and observed the battle.

Unfortunately it had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. While one Scarab had just arrived at the bridge leading back into New Mombasa, the other was encountering heavy resistance nearby. The silver-armored Elite almost wanted to order the bridge-bound one to turn back and assist the other, but he knew that it was too late. The captain of the Scarab's warbling and screaming over the COM plus the virtual image of it taking several anti-armor rounds in the upper leg joint testified to this fact.

It finally toppled, crashing onto its side in a building complex.

Shutting his eyes, the Sangheili tried to force the event from his mind. Scarabs were crewed by top-notch Spec Ops teams, and he had been acquainted with the captain of that particular vehicle. Undoubtedly it would be his responsibility to meet with the mate of the departed, a task that had only been asked of him once before. That one time had been enough.

His thoughts were interrupted by a Kig-Yar's frantic screech. Eyes flying open, OrinÃ© wheeled towards the communication console that the vulture-like creature was manning. Crossing the distance in two strides, he leaned in to discern the co-ordinates: a series of human tunnels beneath the surface, where Covenant forces were regrouping for another attack.

"What is it?" he asked the avian.

"The Demon!" it screeched again. "The Demon is down here!"

The Spec Ops Commander quickly snatched up the COM receiver. "Say again?" he bellowed into it. There was a burst of static and gunfire on the other end before any response came through.

"The Demon is rampaging through the tunnels," a voice on the other end, an Elite, said. "He is leading two Warthogs in a charge through our lines, and has already eliminated an entire column ofâ€" Gunfire again disrupted the transmission, but this time much closer. The channel squealed as a bullet penetrated the transmitter and went dead. With a guttural growl, he thrust the receiver back towards the Jackal who took it with a trembling hand.

"Get me in touch with the Prophet's ship," he said, briefly turning back to the table to observe the sorry state of his army. "This offensive is ridiculous."

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The room was illuminated much more than the hallways were, with built in lights that cast an even, soft glow throughout the massive dome-shaped chamber. Blessed Unit emerged from their hallway into the area and noticed that Angelic and Solemn had already arrived and were surveying the area: seven hallways like the one they had just emerged from led into the room while an eighth and much larger passage sloped downward gently.

_How big is this structure? _Kasa wondered to himself as he looked around the room. The other two Spec Ops units were standing around

the center of the room where a column of light housed a hovering keystone. At least, it looked like a keystone; it was, in fact, the Forerunner artifact that they had been sent to recover.

Balask and Kasa, followed uncomfortably close by the Brutes, strode up to the column while the others fanned out to cover the expansive room and mingle with the other units. Examining it closely, Balask snorted disdainfully. "Is this the Map to the Heavens?"

One Sangheili, from Solemn Unit, nodded in response. "We believe so, but this structure goes extremely deep; there could be any number of artifacts here."

Another, from Angelic, spoke up: "This is the largest Forerunner structure we have ever encountered; no small amount of irony that it's located on the humans' home world."

All the Sangheili present grunted in agreement and stood admiring the object for a few moments more. Finally, after what seemed like far too long, Kasa spoke up: "Are we going to take it?"

His senior turned to him with a small growl but nevertheless reached out to snatch the object. However, just as he did so, a force-field repelled his hand and gave him quite a surprise. Now growling with full force, Balask tried again to remove the stone but once again met with dismal failure. Rage seized him and he swung the barrel of the shotgun at the field, but in an effort of the Gods to once again catch him by surprise the weapon passed through and knocked the stone from its energy cradle. Another Elite dove to catch it and keep it from shattering on the floor, but as soon as his palms touched the surface of the material he cried out in pain; it slipped through his fingers and it struck the ground harmlessly.

"Accursed artifact," he growled, and signaled a pair of Hunters. They ambled over, sharing sounds of amusement before one indicated a satchel tied to his waist. A Grunt hobbled over, picked up the hot stone and quickly deposited it in the bag before his hands could be burned as well.

That action completed, Balask signaled for the unit to move out while he turned on his radio. "Noble Regret, we have retrieved the artifact and are returning to the surface."

The response was almost instantaneous. "Excellent! Be prepared to leave as soon as you get above-ground; we shall be departing immediately."

Upon hearing his, Kasa was taken aback. Leaving? But they were on their enemy's home world! They couldn't just turn their tails and flee. They had to stay and fight.

His commanding officer saw the look in the young warrior's eyes and, in a rare move of compassion, laid his hand on his shoulder. "Sometimes," he said quietly, maneuvering towards their exit, "the Prophets work in mysterious ways."

The three teams quickly evacuated the chamber, but not before noticing the beam of light had disappeared; they filed it away as another Forerunner anomaly and continued on.

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"Excellency!" Rurut called out, summon OrinÃ© to his side. "The teams in the structure have reported a successful extraction of the object and are returning to the surface." The Elite nodded in satisfaction, but the Grunt continued: "The Prophet has ordered us to abandon New Mombasa."

OrinÃ© blanched at this additional order. Abandon their lines? In all his career, he had never seen the Covenant abandon their lines. Had he made a mistake, something so crippling that Regret had seen fit to order their evacuation? Hanging his head with shame, he turned to the Jackal on the COM.

"Put out the order," he sullenly ordered. "All troops prepare to pull out. Those who can, get to the carrier; all others are to link up with groups and board Phantoms in order to return to space pending further orders." The subordinate complied, and soon all the Covenant at the command post were packing up and preparing to leave. Many began moving supplies to the gravity lift that descended from the belly of the carrier, but OrinÃ© decided to forego the easier option. If he stayed with his troops that were still planet-side he might regain some of his lost honor.

There was a familiar clopping sound behind him, and he turned to see Rurut following him out to the Phantoms. "Get on the ship," he said, but the Grunt would not leave.

"I'm staying with you, Excellency," he said.

The Spec Ops Commander wanted to argue, but deep down he knew he'd appreciate the company. Together they boarded a Phantom loaded with regular troops just as the gravity lift began to be withdrawn.

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Kasa and Balask, closely followed by the Grunts and Brutes, jogged out of the opening and into the fresh air above. Hurriedly they pushed technicians and soldiers out of the way to make room for the Hunters close behind, one of which carried the artifact the Prophet was so intent on getting.

Reaching the gravity lift, thousands of tiny, invisible hands seized them and pulled them upwards and into the loading bay. The Covenant working there quickly made room for the soldiers in jet-black armor and the towering behemoths.

"Noble Hierarch," Balask spoke into his radio, "We are onboard."

"Deposit the artifact in the Temple Section," Regret said, and then the channel was closed. While the senior Elite led the Hunters to the appropriate area, Kasa wandered through the ship, unconsciously headed towards the bridge. The doors parted for him as he entered the beating heart of the carrier where the Ship Master, whom he was unfamiliar with, and the Prophet of Regret overlooked the activity

both outside and in.

"Gravity lift retracted, Excellency," the Ship Master reported.

Regret nodded serenely. "Begin moving, and prepare for a Slipspace jump."

The young Elite walked up behind them. "In the atmosphere?"

The Prophet turned and regarded him, but seemed to forgive him for his momentarily lapse in proper respect. "Yes, we must leave as soon as possible. We cannot tarry from this holiest of tasks."

Kasa pushed forward, coming right up to the side of the Ship Master and the Prophet. "But we still have men on the ground!"

The golden-armored Elite gave him a curt slap to the side of his head, though the blow was lessened by his helmet. "Show your respect, young one!" he hissed. Regret, however, ignored them both.

"It is a necessary sacrifice," he muttered. "They should be honored to begin the Great Journey so soon."

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As the Phantom lifted off and OrinÃ©, surrounded by troops and with Rurut at his side, the Brute pilot let out a long Jiralhanae curse. "The carrier is preparing to jump into Slipspace," he roared over the COM, "_inside _the atmosphere!"

The Grunts, Jackals, and Elites inside the ship looked at each other with puzzled expressions. They could feel the ship accelerating greatly underneath them.

"I'll try to get out of the blast range," the pilot said. "Strap in!"

All the soldiers reacted immediately, pushing against the sides of the dropship until the gravity harnesses took effect and anchored them to the walls. The ship continued to gain velocity, beginning to tremble as it approached top speed. However an ever-growing external roar rose up and deafened the warriors inside just before a wall of force smashed into the craft. As the engines overloaded and the gravity harnesses failed, OrinÃ© unconsciously cried out for the Forerunner as he and his comrades were tossed about inside, but instead of the name of the Gods, he found himself shouting the name of his sister.

Intervention came in the form of a wall that delivered deep, dark blackness.

7. Comfort Zone

Chapter 7: Comfort Zone

In the hangar was gathered a crowd of Covenant warriors, surging in

and surrounding the Phantom as it landed. Among them was Yarna 'Orgalmee, using his crimson armor with pulsing golden flashes to push through the excess of onlookers. The Arbiter's mission had returned, and to the great surprise of the Hierarchs the Arbiter had survived his ordained task. Apparently the Forerunners had another purpose in mind for him. Now all crowded around to get a glimpse at the Holy Warrior of the Sangheili.

As he descended from the gravity lift, wild cheering broke out from the Elites that had assembled. Startled the Arbiter looked around, but his face became stoic once more and he moved out of the way of the gravity. Yarna made to approach him, but was repelled by the sight of what next came out of the Phantom.

Tartarus, the Alpha Chieftain of the Jiralhanae, dropped down to the deck. Immediately the cheers died and turned to a simmering pot of murmurs. The white-haired Brute merely looked around and grunted disdainfully, then rotated to show what he had in his hands. It was small and spherical, with a single blue light upon the front.

A collective gasp rose from the crowd. An Oracle. Even Yarna found himself speechless. Only one was said to have existed, within the confines of the large Forerunner ship that gave its power to High Charity, but at one point it had gone rogue and attempted to leave when the first humans were discovered. That had been the start of the war, the indicator that this species was so offending to the Gods that their own creation attempted to flee at their mere mention.

However, it had been long believed that there was but one Oracle. Now there was another.

Finally recovering himself, Yarna moved towards the Arbiter. When he drew close, he bowed. "Arbiter," he said as he raised himself back up, "your presence is requested at the Sanctum of the Hierarchs."

Tartarus smiled. Jagged unclean teeth were visible as his lips peeled back. "We were on our way this very minute, Sangheili."

Yarna pointedly ignored him. "I shall escort you," he said.

The Arbiter nodded his assent, and the pair walked off, followed closely behind by Tartarus, who still held the Oracle beneath one arm. Glancing back, Yarna took note of the disrespectful treatment of the Holy One and snorted.

"Carry that with honor, _Brute_," he growled, emphasizing their client title, "or you may never have the ability to carry anything again."

Tartarus scowled, baring his filthy tusks. "And I suppose you would understand better, Hatchling, how to handle it?"

Yarna bristled and was about to bring his spear to bear when the Arbiter placed a hand on his shoulder. "Cease," he said. Abashed, the Honor Guard stared for a moment before turning and resuming his walk. The rest of the trip was made in silence, and upon reaching the Sanctum, the pair entered, leaving Yarna outside with his Honor Guard brethren. He turned and departed after nodding his greeting to their

captain.

As he walked, he thought. _The Arbiter should not allow such heresy to go unpunished. It should have been him to raise the complaint, not me. _He stopped and looked out a window at the expanse of stars beyond, at the still-burning ruins of Halo. Fires spun out into space where they were choked out by the lack of oxygen.

He snorted and resumed his pace. _He pales against Grandfather_.

â€"â€"

Kasa 'Yonomee grunted slightly, trying to fight his own dismay and discomfort as he lay on the gravity bed in his room. Confined to quarters after his outburst on the bridge. It was unjust, his actions had been justified. Their hasty retreat, as "necessary" as the Prophet had deemed it, resulted in the death of many of their own soldiers on the ground, not to mention the dishonor in simply abandoning the human home world. And indeed he had called the Holy One some ungainly things, which he truly regretted, but the force with which he had been removed from the bridge seemed unnecessary. Even now, the bruise on his head still ached.

His chest heaved and fell in a deep sigh. The armor and dermo-suit that had so often brought him comfort in training seemed far too heavy now, even though he had removed the helmet and gauntlets.

_OrinÃ©, _he lamented. His commander had been a hero, a true Sangheili warrior worthy of a ballad; he had survived Halo, the Parasite, even the Demon! But one of his own Hierarchs, one who had awarded him with the Etching of Glory, had turned his back on him and left him to die in the inferno of the Slipspace eruption. He knew he should be ashamed of these thoughts, of the words he said, but he could not bring himself to feel it. Was he a heretic? He almost didn't care, but a subtle shiver ran its way down his back.

A persistent beeping entered his consciousness, and he lazily rolled an eye to look around the room. The entrance request button flashed insistently, alerting him to a being wishing to enter his quarters.

"Enter," he called out, making no attempt to conceal his frustration. The door parted with a small hiss and allowed two Unggoy to enter. Kasa recognized them as Nunot and Opom, the medic and psycho of his unit. With a heavy sigh Kasa lifted himself into a sitting position and faced his friends.

Opom approached him carefully. "Excellency, are you all right?"

The Elite shook his head. "No, I'm not," he muttered bitterly. "OrinÃ© is dead, and we have left the humans' home world unconquered." He glanced up and looked around the small room. "Now I am confined to my quarters!" With a roar he slammed his fist against a wall. The gesture accomplished nothing, aside from helping his ego and bruising his hand. "That damn Prophet... is a fool."

He expected the two Unggoy to blanch at his words, expected them to go running to the Deck Master and report him for heresy. He almost wanted a squad of Elites to march in, raise their rifles and execute him on the spot. If his legacy was to be an unglorified stain on the wall, so be it.

However, Kasa wasn't expecting what happened next. Opom simply nodded and turned back to Nunot, who gave his own timid sign of approval. Then the diminutive soldier turned his attention back to the Elite.

"Come with us," he said simply, motioning for Nunot to open the door. "There is much to discuss."

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Yarna entered the meditation gardens in order to escape his own mind, but found another within. Rtas 'Vadumee was sitting in full armor sans helmet beneath the shade of a halli tree. His eyes were closed in deep thought; not wishing to disturb him, Yarna quietly walked up to him and took up a similar posture nearby.

It wasn't until a few minutes later that the silver-armored Ultra opened his eyes and turned to regard his latest company. "It is good to see you again, friend," he said, "but I doubt you are here for a social visit."

Despite himself, the off-duty Honor Guard smiled. "Peace of mind, perhaps."

Rtas nodded. "Have you spoken to OrinÃ© recently?" he asked after a moment.

"No, I'm afraid not," Yarna replied. "Why?"

The Ultra closed his eyes again. "It is no matter," he muttered. "Just some family business for him to consider." Though Yarna was overcome with curiosity, he kept his mandibles shut for a while longer.

Finally, he broke: "What do you make of the Arbiter?"

"A fine warrior," Rtas began, "but not concerned with the tangles of morality or honor, it seems. Several times he acted against the code of fair combat, but when fighting against heretics, there is little call for such considerations. There was great skill in his hands as he wielded all manner of weapon against our foes, and his sharp mind won us the day. I would say that I know of few better than he."

Yarna ground his teeth against each other, but endeavored to say nothing. "That sounds... unbelievable."

Rtas regarded him for a minute before rising and stretching. With a sigh he lowered his arms. "You seem to take this news heavily," he said. "Why does it concern you?"

Yarna kept his riveted to the tree. "Family business," he muttered.

â€"â€"

The Prophet of Regret's ship, *_Sublime Purity_*, was one of the many vast carriers in the fleet. Each of these impressive ships was designed to be both warships of the highest caliber and very livable, comfortable places for the inhabitants. Priests and priestesses of the Covenant lived in it alongside the soldiers, though their quarters were separated. A grand arboretum, bearing the vegetation of the Elites' home world of Sanghelios, was often trafficked by soldiers, especially this time of day.

Kasa, led by the Grunts Nunot and Opom, walked idly through the gardens. A large transparent ceiling stretched out above them; usually it would be filled with stars, nebulae, or views of planets, but during Slip-space travel it was just black. Artificial lights illuminated the trees, shrubs, and flowers, casting lights over groups of clerics as they meditated and prayed to the Forerunner.

The group of three settled themselves beneath a halli tree, the Elite folding his legs beneath him while the Unggoy merely plopped down. Together they sat in silence for a moment, allowing a group of conversing priestesses to pass before Opom began speaking.

"You are not the first to realize that the Prophets have faults," he said in a hushed voice. "There are others, Excellency, many others."

For a moment, Kasa seethed. "Heretics," he hissed.

"You are one too," Opom pointed out. "Every so-called 'heretic' has a reason to question the Covenant. Your idol, the commander, has been killed by the Prophet of Regret." The Elite wanted to stop him, point out that the Prophet wasn't the one to actually fire a weapon and kill him or sink a blade into his flesh, but withheld the comment. Opom continued: "There are many who share your pain and your confusion and doubt. You are not alone."

The Grunt stopped talking and let his words and the implications behind them sink in. All in all, the whole ordeal left Kasa with a funny tingling in his mandibles. His whole life he had been raised to serve the Covenant. Since his time as a hatchling, he had been shown the glorious life of a soldier in service of the Prophets. He had striven for it in the academy and in training, where his combined high scores and combat prowess had earned him a position as Prophet Blessed, worthy of wearing the jet-black armor that adorned his body. Yet all this had always left him

with a feeling of uneasy emptiness, one that he just couldn't fill no matter how much he devoted himself to scripture or combat.

But he had seen OrinÃ© when watching the ceremony where the Etchings of Glory were delivered, had heard the tales of his modest bravery and survival abilities, and had clung to him as a hero. Finally, someone who did what the Covenant asked of him and was rewarded justly! Perhaps, should he ever reach that level of greatness, he would himself be a hero.

The hero, however, had been stranded on the human home world, left to

die by the primates' hands if not from the massive Slipspace explosion caused by the atmospheric jump. Had the Covenant really loved him as much as they let on? Evidently not. So, if he were to become a hero like OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee had been would they carelessly abandon him along the road to the Great Journey?

Of course.

Quickly the hesitation he had felt hardened into certainty. This was his path to survival, the only way out. He faced the two Grunts who had sat regarding his facial expressions, tuning out the thunderous footfalls of two Hunters in full armor as they lumbered down the trail. "What must I do?" Kasa asked.

Before Opom or Nunot could reply, however, a light above them drew their gazes upward. The void of Slipspace peeled back, revealing an expanse of stars and a large blue planet.

_We have arrived at our destination, _Kasa thought, scrutinizing the planet, _but where are we? _His reverie was interrupted by the blaring of a klaxon and a general alert that had been put out over the ship. The black-armored Elite climbed to his feet, followed by the Grunts.

"We shall talk later," Opom said, hurrying off with Nunot in tow. Kasa remained for a moment longer, studying the planet and fighting off a chill that passed through him as he caught a ring-shaped silhouette against the blue light.

â€"â€"

His own experiences on Halo far too fresh for his own comfort, Balask 'Zakamee had to rethink his preparations for this deployment carefully. On the first Halo, he had been so overcome with religious zeal that it had blinded him to the real danger present on the ring: the Parasite. For that mistake he had nearly died. Now, though his desire to follow the Forerunners to godhood was as great as ever, he dearly wished he could simply glass the whole surface from the comfort of space and have it be done with.

However, the Prophet of Regret's orders had to be carried out: he wished for a base of operations on the sacred ring, somewhere close to the landed carrier. Scouts that had been sent in Phantoms reported that a series of temples that jutted out from a vast lake would make fine locations; Regret had listened and deployed OrinÃ©'s... no, _Balask's _team to ensure that the structures were secure. With the death of both the Unit Commander and sub-Commander, the responsibility of

leadership fell upon the Senior Officer, Balask. To say he was comfortable with it would be incorrect.

_When last I was on a Halo, _he thought to himself as the Phantom loaded with his team and a second with a regular infantry squadron prepared to deploy its gravity lift, _I was simply following my orders, not giving them. _As the lift came online, Balask was the first one out and onto the surface of the temple. Immediately he brought up his plasma rifle, scanning the area and stepping away from the ship as his comrades descended too.

Once the entire unit was on the ground, he began issuing orders. "Kasa, take Opom and scout the main chamber," he barked, sending the Elite and Grunt jogging towards the temple. "Sesep, round up a couple of Grunts and Jackals from the infantry detachment and set up a secure landing zone for the Prophet. It'll also act as a fallback point, just in case." The black-armored Grunt nodded and waved at a couple of Covenant soldiers that had just disembarked from the second Phantom. _I doubt we'll need it, _Balask noted, _but it wouldn't hurt to be safe._

"The rest of you!" he bellowed towards the remaining four Grunts, two Jackals, and two Elites of the infantry. "Secure the temple, and report to me every five minutes via COM. Be wary of the Parasite!" he added the last part as an afterthought, hoping it wouldn't come up. They filed into the building, and the small team he left behind started setting up a couple of defense turrets and lay down the landing lights.

The black-clad Sangheili strode into the structure, passing through a grand foyer and entering the primary chamber. It was certainly grandiose enough for Regret's taste, and he could immediately tell where the recording devices would be placed to broadcast his sermons. He could see Kasa and Opom searching every nook and cranny, ensuring that aside from the main door and the two smaller ones there were no breaches or possible intrusion points.

Several minutes later, they reported back to him that the chamber was clear and secure. Balask still felt twitchy, almost as if the Flood were in every shadow, but accepted their report. Periodic reports from the infantry squad filtered in every so often, but nothing interesting: no Parasites, no Sentinels, nothing but empty corridors. Aside from finding a series of platforms that could move between the structures in the lake and also link to the shore, no further discoveries were made.

A meager hour later, a fleet of dropships arrived, several veering off to the sides and going beyond the temple, undoubtedly bound to set up outposts along the edge of the lake. As two flew escort, one came to a halt above the designated landing site and deposited its passengers: one Prophet and a contingent of Honor Guards.

Balask stood waiting for their arrival. "Holy One," he said, bowing before the Prophet of Regret, "I am honored to declare your temple to be secure."

The Prophet nodded. "Very good, Commander. You have done well to find me this location. The view is splendid and inspired, clearly the best our Gods could offer us." Something inside Balask twinged. This was the self-same creature who had ordered the deaths of so many of his brothers

on the surface of the human home world, yet here he was, floating comfortably in his gravity throne, speaking of what the Gods could offer him.

_Were I he, _the black-armored Sangheili decided, _I would be on my knees praying for forgiveness for a week straight_. Instead, he nodded his thanks for the praise which was offered. "The chamber within awaits your inspection, Exalted."

"My Honor Guards are quite capable of accompanying me," Regret said with a dismissive wave. "You and your unitâ€"Blessed, was it?â€"may return to the ship for rest." The robed creature then proceeded to float up the stairs, flanked on all sides by red-armored guardians, as the rest of Blessed Unit walked down. They took the appropriate amount of time to bow as the Prophet passed, receive his blessings, and report to their commander.

"The ground is secure, Excellency," Kasa said.

"Let us rest, then," Balask said, turning towards the Phantom.

â€"â€"

Yarna was still meditating in the gardens when the Arbiter interrupted his peace. They exchanged the necessary greetings, though the Honor Guard couldn't keep all the bitterness out of his voice; the holy warrior seemed to ignore it, though, and settled on the ground.

He was able to stomach his intrusion for all of five minutes.

"I must go," Yarna said suddenly, standing up and giving a curt bow. "I have business that requires my attention. Excuse me." He exited the gardens, trying not to show that he was fuming within. His thoughts were dark and his intentions foggy, but no matter what he knew he had to leave. His deception must have failed, as a few minutes later he heard the rapid footfalls of an approaching Sangheili.

"Hold." It was not an order, but the force behind his voice made it clear that it hadn't been intended as a polite request. Turning to face his pursuer, Yarna viewed the Arbiter with his own face set in stone. _I must not betray my inner feelings_, he thought. _To do so would be improper_.

The Arbiter's face scrutinized the Honor Guard, and in a flash Yarna realized who he was looking at: the Supreme Commander who had been dishonored before the Council and nearly the entire Covenant. But he had been declared a heretic; why was he now the Arbiter? It made no sense, and only served to infuriate Yarna further. That a proclaimed heretic could hold the office of the Arbiter, a holy warrior, seemed to devalue his grandfather.

Clearly his agitation must have shown on his face, as the Arbiter cocked his head to one side. "My presence clearly irritates you," he said in his husky voice. How he was so reminiscent of Orin! "Why is it? Are you put off by the claims of heresy? By the fact that I am the one who lost the sacred ring to the Parasite and the Demon?"

Yarna could not help his glare. "I do not despise you for that. I fought on Halo with my comrades and barely survived the blast. I have faced the horrors of the Flood and the humans in the same breath. My blood still stains the rocks and soil of that holy place the same as yours, so do not think for a moment that I judge you a heretic. To do so would be to judge myself." He turned to leave, but the Arbiter stepped in front of him.

The warrior's brown eyes were blazing with intensity. "Then why?"

Fighting back his own growl, the Honor Guard stood straighter. "Because, though I do not believe it, the Council called you a heretic and wish you to be executed, yet here you stand, not only still breathing but wearing the mantle of our most holy of warriors. I do not believe you deserve it, given the shadows of greatness in which you stand. Excuse me." Believing the conversation over, Yarna gave his elder a shove and stepped haughtily past him.

Childish as the maneuver had been, he had not been expecting the retaliation he received. Immediately the Arbiter grabbed him from behind, but with a twitch and roll of his shoulders he sent the warrior over his shoulders. However, he landed upright, leaving Yarna to take more drastic action. Lunging, the Honor Guard struck for the Arbiter's face with his fist.

It was a mistake to put all of his force behind one blow, he realized too late as the Arbiter sidestepped, grabbed his arm, and proceeded to flip the younger Sangheili in much the same fashion as he had been flipped moments before. Yarna landed heavily and cried out, half out of pain and half out of indignity, but he swept his legs to attempt to topple the warrior. Though he did not fall, the Arbiter was forced to leap back, giving Yarna the time and energy he needed to recover. As soon as he was up, the fight began anew. The Arbiter rushed forward, but just before landing what Yarna was expecting to be a very forward blow hung back, forcing the Honor Guard to over-extend himself and landing several smart blows.

Yarna recovered and mimicked the move, but his more experienced opponent easily caught his arm and twisted it, straining the sinews and tendons, threatening to pop the limb from his shoulder. Yarna let out a terrible shout and fell to his knees, the pain too much to bear.

The Arbiter leaned down. "You are not fit to know this," he hissed, "but those who wear this armor are heretics, being punished by glorious death for some horrible crime. Whether you believe me or not is your own prerogative, but know that whomever you knew that wore this armor, they deserved their fate." With that, he released Yarna's arm and stormed off, not intending to return to meditation. Climbing to his feet, the Honor Guard rubbed his aching arm.

_Floodbait, _he thought bitterly before proceeding to limp away. He would not hear such lies, especially coming from so dishonored an individual. Yet every step he took the idea sunk further into his mind, and he was forced to wonder at the idea that perhaps the holiest of warriors was also the darkest of sinners.

â€"â€"

Comfortably slumbering in his bed, Balask had not been expecting a messenger, and thus when the Kig-Yar entered unbidden the Special Operations officer reacted on gut instinct. Remembering the intrusion on him in High Charity by the Jiralhanae, the Sangheili wasted no time in setting upon the intruder, landing two solid blows before he noticed the Lumidex clutched in the pitiful creature's hands. Mumbling an apology, the Elite took the unit and read over the

report. When he finished, he shoved the Lumidex back into the Jackal's arms. "Wake the rest of my unit," he growled, "and be more careful about it!" The properly humbled and bruised creature retreated.

Soon after, the entirety of Blessed Unit was in a Phantom bound for the surface of the ring.

"Excellency," Kasa said, exiting the cockpit where the Brute pilot was guiding the craft down, "what is our mission?"

"The Prophet fears that we were followed during our... _withdrawal _from the human world," he said, careful to avoid calling the escape a retreat. "Several outposts have gone silent since a few scouts reported seeing what looked like a human ship above the ring, so we must investigate and afterwards conduct threat aversion detail."

The assembled squadron groaned. Threat aversion detail meant going in closer to the Prophet and conducting a painstaking search for anything out of the ordinary; the questioning of several Covenant soldiers would entail, as well as further patrols. It also meant that it would be many hours before their next rest cycle.

Upon landing at the site, the situation didn't look very promising. It had been a smaller outpost, one looking over a valley and river. With only a small contingent, it hadn't been declared a very important spot to begin with, which is why Balask had immediately suspected it to be the source of any human intrusion. Individual human atmospheric entry vehicles were found here and there, with supplies and one or two dead human soldiers dressed in sealed black armor. Dead Covenant, however, were found in droves. Two dead snipers, four Elite Majors, and several Jackals, Grunts, and Elite Minors were among the deceased.

"No survivors," Kasa murmured, examining the wounds of a clustered group of bodies. "These must have been cut down while descending from a Phantom, probably from that turret up there." He pointed up towards the top of a small structure, where a damaged plasma turret occupied an open-air ledge.

Balask shook his head and pulled out his COM unit. As he thumbed a switch, he found that it had automatically defaulted to Regret's endless sermons. _"We will be the first of the Covenant to venture forth," _the Prophet spoke excitedly several kilometers away. _"I shall light this holy ring, release its cleansing flame, and burn a path into the divine beyond!" _

The Senior Officer switched the channel over to a military one and keyed in Regret's carrier. "Blessed Unit reporting."

"Reading, Blessed," the reply came from the Ship Master on the bridge. "What is your status?"

"We can confirm the presence of humans on the ring," he spoke. "Their entry point was in sector eight."

He imagined the Elite on the other end to be nodding. "Affirmative, Blessed. Units throughout this part of Halo report similar findings. Return to the carrier, but be ready to move out. Rumor has it that a Demon is on this ring as well."

8. Guidance

Chapter 8: Guidance

The Sanctum of the Hierarch was vast and ornate, with a dedicated gravity lift leading to it. Within, in the approaching hall, four massive pillars were held erect in stationary gravity fields. They rotated slowly and swayed when a breeze blew through, and for Honor Guards stationed in that antechamber they had a calming, hypnotic effect.

Yarna 'Orgalmee, however, had been blessed with a post within the discussion chamber itself. However, when on any other day he would have been basking in the glory of the Hierarchs, he was internally fuming over the fight in the gardens. The thought still lingered in his mind, the idea that in order to gain the position of Arbiter you had to be sentenced to death for heresy.

He strained his mind, trying to recall his grandfather. The elder Sangheili had been dead well before Yarna's birth, and in fact died when his father was only still a Hatchling. Everything his family knew was only through tales told by the Lineage.

A weight settled in his stomach. So there may be truth in the thought after all.

Slowly he was drawn out of his own mind by a growing uneasiness in the chamber. All around him, his fellow Honor Guards gave subtle signs of irritation and discomfort: a shift of weight, a tighter grip on the spear, the slight roll of the shoulders. At first, Yarna could not understand why, but then he quickly saw what had agitated his brothers so: a massive Jiralhanae with a snow-white pelt had entered and knelt before the Hierarchs. Tartarus, he thought bitterly. The Alpha Jiralhanae always meant trouble, and had recently been in discussion with the High Prophets of Truth and Mercy more than ever before. All Sangheili smelled something foul coming over the horizon, they were only unsure of what treachery to expect.

"Tartarus," Truth intoned, "it is a pleasure to have your company with us once more. Tell me, what is on your mind?"

The Brute's smile was jagged, broken by filthy tusks and teeth. "Noble Truth, noble Mercy, I wish to once again petition for the existence of Jiralhanae Honor Guards. I believe they may serve you better than this lot." The meaning behind the statement was not at all veiled, and several of the Honor Guards visibly tensed, bringing their spears into the ready position. However, the Captain, dressed in silver and gold armor, quickly affixed those who moved a withering glare. They stood down, but not without palpable resentment.

These events not lost on Truth, the Prophet smiled benevolently and gestured around the knelt Tartarus in a blessing motion. "Your intention is selfless and generous as always, my dear Chieftain, but the Sangheili are stout and loyal in their guardianship. They have not failed us, and so long as that remains true, we shall not fail them."

"But my Great Excellencies," Tartarus protested, "their shortcomings,

so overlooked, could lead to disastrous consequences. Please, allow me to replace them now, before any harm befalls you."

A clammy sensation formed on Yarna's hands, but Mercy's words quickly calmed him: "None could ever replace the Sangheili! They have been instrumental in the Covenant, ever since its formation. They, striding beside the Prophets, were the first race in our Holy Union and helped us bring the Unggoy under the blanket of the Forerunners." Inwardly the Elite breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to know that, in these changing times and the rise of the Jiralhanae, his race still had its old allies.

The look in Truth's eyes, however, suggested that the other Hierarch did not agree as completely as the Sangheili would find comfortable. It didn't last for a full second, but Yarna caught the subtle glare and it made his hearts pause. The slight glimmer in his eye, the way his mouth twitched ever so slightly; it was obvious that the other Prophet felt very differently about the situation. Tension and anger between the Hierarchs did not bode well for their protectors.

Quickly, though, Truth was recomposed. "Yes, that is true," Truth conceded, and continued on his little orbit around the room and discussed more prominent matters with his two companions. Nervously, Yarna's eyes looked through the Honor Guards present and saw most were as shaken as he, if not more so.

_Would a Prophet betray the Elites? _The concept shook them all to their cores.

After a while of conference, Tartarus took his leave. As he left he glared at the two entrance guards, who gladly reciprocated. Truth retired to his private quarters shortly afterward, leaving only Mercy in the large chamber. A pillar of soft, purple light beamed up in the center of the room, and a large window looked out into the blackness of Slipspace. The chime sounded for the guard duty to change, but while the other guards filed off Yarna remained and approached the lone Prophet.

"Holy One?" he began, dropping to one knee. The Hierarch turned and regarded him, not unkindly but with significant interest.

"Rise, young one," he said, and Yarna stood. Mercy's voice was old, full of wisdom and years of experience, but it was also brittle and weak. There was a slight wheeze that told a great deal about the little time he had left. "What troubles you?"

The Elite shifted slightly and removed his helmet to further show his humility. "Noble Hierarch, I feel... uncertain. I need guidance." He looked at the aged face, wrinkles appearing deeper in the light cast by the column. Mercy motioned for him to continue. "I know how wrong it is for a simple soldier like me to question the powers above me, but I'm afraid. I fear for the future of the Sangheili."

Mercy sighed and gazed back out the window. "You refer to the Prophet of Truth." Yarna nodded. He was unsure of what to expect from following this line of inquiry, but he was very much taken aback at what the Prophet said next:

"You have every right and reason to be afraid of him."

The Prophet glanced back at the Elite. "You did not expect to hear that, did you?" he said amusedly, a smile growing on his face. "I share your concerns, young one. I was quite opposed to Truth becoming a Hierarch, long ago when it was a heated topic of debate among the High Council. At the time, he claimed that forcing the Jiralhanae into the Covenant would bring increased prosperity to us; he even went so far as to say they would serve us better than your race." Mercy chuckled slightly at the memory. "The Sangheili in the council didn't respond well to that statement, as you can imagine."

There was a lengthy pause as the grey-skinned Prophet gazed out into the void. When next he spoke, his voice was cracking with sorrow. "This was long before you were born, likely when your father was still but a child, but there was... a minor uprising. In the chaos, a Sangheili assassin armed with a plasma blade snuck into the Prophets' chambers with a mind to slay Truth. However, the High Prophet of Glory had been visiting at the time and the assassin slew him instead, mistaking him for Truth.

"Thus, there was an open position in the Hierarchy," Mercy continued, still staring out the window. "It was a unanimous decision by the Minor Prophets in the council that Truth be moved to fill Glory's position. The damage done by that young assassin did a great deal of damage to the reputation of the Sangheili." The Prophet sighed deeply, eyes staring off, focusing on something that wasn't anywhere to be found. "Glory was a trusted friend of mine, a good person..." His voice trailed off.

Yarna stood, contemplating this grave news. Truth did not like the Elites? It was difficult to grasp that his kind had an enemy in the Hierarchy. He almost didn't want to admit it, but the evidence was far too clear.

There was, however, another thought in his mind. He cleared his throat, a scratchy and rough sound. "Noble Mercy, what became of the Elite who killed the Prophet of Glory?"

"Him?" Mercy looked up as if he hadn't realized Yarna was still there. "He became the next Arbiter."

With that last disturbing bit of evidence, the young warrior excused himself and left, heading back to his chambers with his mind drowned in confusion and worry. As he passed an observation window, he saw the black void of Slipspace peel back and a blue gas-giant come into view. Many and more Covenant ships completed their jumps, still in defense formation around High Charity, but Yarna's eyes were riveted to a silhouette visible against the misty sapphire of the new planet.

Another Halo.

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The emergency summons had, once again, caught Balask 'Zakamee by surprise. Rest seemed elusive; his team had dropped in again, this time capturing a handful of humans, and now whatever this was. He was just fastening his helmet in place when he emerged in the hangar bay of the carrier. The rest of his team was standing beneath a Phantom dropship, apparently waiting for him. As he joined up with them, they

were brought aboard by the gravity lift.

"What is the meaning of this?" Balask grumbled as he stepped into the cockpit. Two Jiralhanae were piloting it. "Why have I again been recalled from my station to run more errands for a paranoid Prophet?"

One of the Brutes looked back, but returned his attention to the console. "Emergency orders from Commander Rtas 'Vadumee," he said. "The Prophet of Regret's temple is under attack by the Demon. You and several other Special Operations lances are to be dropped off to eliminate it once and for all."

Mention of the Demon calmed Balask's temper. He knew how pointless it was to become hot-headed over it; to do so would be to fall into its trap. Instead he went back into the troop bay and relayed the information. Though considerably distressed, the team took it well, even poor Nunot. They would be dropped in, with limited support, to attempt the destruction of one of the Covenant's most notorious enemies. It was almost certainly a suicide mission.

While Balask was outfitting himself with a Carbine and his human shotgun, however, he felt the Phantom veer sharply off course, almost losing his footing. When he stormed into the cockpit, the same Jiralhanae had an explanation waiting.

"The Prophet is dead," he growled. "We are being ordered back. A carrier will descend to destroy the temple and kill the Demon." The Brutes pulled back to a reasonable distance and halted the Phantom, allowing the occupants of the cockpit to see the destruction that would shortly fall upon the temple. Once the carrier was in place, it unleashed a weapon which was used to glass planets. The blast shattered the temple, disintegrating parts of it close enough to the source. As steam rose from around the site of the destruction, Balask lowered his head.

_What shall happen now? _The Covenant would not react well to the death of one of its Hierarchs. Upon whom would the blame fall? The Demon? But it had been the source of so much catastrophe as late; like the Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice, someone would be made an example of.

As he retreated to inform his team, he could not dismiss the sense of dread now forming in his lowest stomach.

â€"â€"

Sleep would not come for Yarna. As he lay in his bed, eyes closed, trying to force slumber on himself, he could not find that inner peace that would allow him rest. Too much was going on in his mind. Truth and Tartarus had it in for the Sangheili, Mercy was their only ally and would not live long enough to continue protecting them, and to further add insult to injury his grandfather had been a heretic as well. Some truths, he knew, were better kept secret.

A knock came at his door, followed by two chimes requesting entry and more knocking. "Enter," he called out, and immediately regretted it. The hairy Brute that was now standing at his door was not a welcome face, especially now. "As I recall, Jobrinus, I said I would kill you if you ever came to my quarters again."

"If this were anything but official business I wouldn't have bothered," replied the Jiralhanae, still privately nursing the bruises he had received from his beating. "But I have been asked specifically to come here."

Before Yarna could inquire as to why, two more Brutes appeared at his sides and roughly pushed into the room, crossing it and approaching the case that still held the Elite's armor. Immediately he was on his feet.

"What is the meaning of this?!" he roared as the two Jiralhanae pried it open and began pulling the pieces of the armor out. Before they could grab the spear, however, the Elite retrieved it and struck one of the Brutes upside the head with it. He cried out in pain and dropped the components he was carrying, but quickly delivered a punch to Yarna's face. He staggered back from the blow, almost not feeling the kick delivered by his companion but certainly realizing he was now on the floor; the weapon was pried from his hands and the Brute spit onto his chest.

Trying to see past the stars, he looked at Jobrinus, who merely smiled. "Thus is the will of the Prophets," he said simply before storming off. Yarna pulled himself to his feet and tried to keep his balance. He stumbled out the door and into the hallway, where he saw the most blasphemous sight he had seen, even in light of Halo's destruction.

Two Brutes were walking down the hallway, chatting idly, and wearing Honor Guard armor. _That armor is reserved for Elites! _Yarna immediately lunged for one of the Brutes. "What is happening?" he cried out as he clawed for the beast's throat. His friend was quick on the draw, twirling the spear about and striking the Elite square on the head and making him back off.

"Silence, whelp!" he yelled. "Do not make us arrest you." The two started laughing and walked off, leaving behind a very confused Yarna.

What has happened?

â€"â€"

Kasa 'Yonomee could not find rest. Seeing the temple destroyed, hearing of Regret's death... even though the Demon was now dead, it brought little consolation. Rumors were already spreading throughout the fleet that there had been a change of the guard on High Charity: now the Jiralhanae, not the Sangheili, would be the Honor Guard of the Prophets. It went against everything Kasa thought he knew, everything he thought he understood.

Unsure of what to think, the young warrior sought Opom's direction.

"He was a trickster and a creature unworthy of the Great Journey," the black armored Grunt said, "but no one deserves to be killed by the Demon." Kasa nodded not quite understanding but not wishing to say anything. He almost considered the diminutive alien to be a teacher, a wise master, despite the rigid caste system forbidding the formality of such a thing.

He supposed that he looked to Opom because Orin's Fulsamee was dead, and he would have been an acceptable teacher. It still pained him to think of the warrior's unglorified death, but the karmic destruction of Regret sated him slightly.

The chime at his door sounded and it hissed open, revealing a haggard-looking Balask 'Zakamee. His weary eyes fell upon the Elite and the Grunt as the door eased shut behind him.

"Dire news," he said, slumping onto Kasa's bed. "The Hierarchs have become gravely displeased by the recent events and have stripped the Honor Guards of their duty. They're still looking for ways to punish the rest of our race."

"Stripped the Honor Guards?" Kasa blanched. "Who will protect them?"

"The Brutes," Balask spat.

Kasa groaned and leaned against a wall. The rumors were true, then. "So we've been forsaken?"

Balask shook his head. "Not entirely."

There was a moment of silence before the younger soldier spoke. "What now?"

The Senior Officer thought for a moment. "We will be deployed soon," he rationalized, standing up and stretching a bit. "There are still some humans on this ring, and certainly there is the threat of the Parasite. Both of you get some rest and prepare for a great battle." With that, the ranking officer walked out, the door securely closing behind him.

The remaining Elite clicked his lower mandibles, the equivalent of a shrug. "So are our orders," he said and lay back on the bed. Opom regarded him for a moment and then departed, leaving Kasa in his solitude.

â€"â€"

In the amphitheater of the Council, Yarna stood barely clothed among a group of similarly dressed Sangheili. They were all growling and muttering amongst each other as the Council of Deed and Doctrine seated in the high seats did the same. As much as the current situation with the Jiralhanae was aggravating he found this rash of inaction and toothless deliberation to be downright infuriating.

Finally one of the Councilors stood. The low roar died down. "This is a difficult time," he said, voice carrying over the crowd, "but I assure you, we are working to make this transition easy and without incident."

"What of us?!" shouted one former Honor Guard, raising his fist high. "We, who were loyal for ages, who guarded the Hierarchs with our lives, are now cast away like a powerless rifle!" Further cries of outrage exploded from the crowd.

"We are trying to find recompense based on your station," said the Councilor, though his voice was barely heard over the din. Yarna watched as his comrades surged, a single misspoken word away from riot. If something did not happen soon, there would be blood in this very room. With the Jiralhanae usurping the Sangheili, the last thing they could afford to do was fight amongst themselves.

Fortunately, a much older and wiser Councilor stood and ordered them into silence. Even if they did not actually cease their wrathful motions, the volume of the crowd fell quickly. "Though you are displaced, you must remember who you are," said the elder. "We are Elites of the Covenant, trusted warriors and leaders alike, and acting like a rabble of Unggoy during the Rebellion will do more to damage ourselves than help."

Now they grew quiet and listened. The elder continued, "Some among you, Captains and distinguished warriors, will be given Zealot rankings, while the rest shall be recognized as Elite Majors. This ensures our race will be possessed of appropriate leadership in the turbulent times to come."

There were murmurs, most expressing something close to satisfaction while a few were still angry. The Councilor accepted a Lumidex from his younger counterpart and began calling names, of which Yarna 'Orgalmee was one. Out of the crowd of hundreds, twenty or so now stood before the Council. Most were Honor Guard Captains, though a few were like Yarna, simple watchmen, who had been distinguished one way or another. He felt a weight on his chest right where the Etching of Glory was.

"Kneel," the elder ordered, and they did so. Yarna realized that this was a promotion ceremony, albeit very sudden and in a group. There was no precedent, but then again, this was an unprecedented time.

"Do all those of you who are prostrate before the Council swear to uphold the values of the Sangheili, the Covenant, and above all the Forerunners with your lives and commands?"

They answered together, "Yes, Excellency."

"Do you swear to honor your warriors and lead them through suffering and delight until such a day as the Great Journey may bestow divinity upon us all?"

"Yes, Excellency?"

"Then rise, honored warriors, and accept the mantle of Elite Zealot within our great Covenant."

â€"â€"

Yarna, clad in his shining new golden armor, strode into the council chambers proper, where an emergency session of the Council of Masters had been called. The great sound slammed into him like a wall: the shouts and clambering of the Elites all trying to be heard over one-another. He caught snippets of their conversations.

"We must resign!" a Councilor cried, slamming his fist on his terminal.

"Nay," another countered, "we must reassert our dominance! Kill the Brutes!"

A very loud chorus of voices agreed with this last option, a few of the contributors even flashing on their plasma swords and chanting battle cries.

The newly-appointed Field Commander studied this spectacle carefully, judging the state of the Sangheili. It wasn't hard to tell that they were upset, angry, and dishonored. They all felt the need for revenge, the thirst for blood; a few might even have killed a Prophet or two if they weren't stopped. In a way, he didn't _want _to stop them: he felt the same way, deprived of his honorable station and having lost it to a Brute, by the orders of the Hierarchs no less.

He let them carry on for a minute before bellowing for quiet. His voice was loud and carried far, ensuring that all the Councilors and soldiers present heard him. They quickly fell silent, understanding the significance of both the brand new armor and the freshly-burned Etching of Glory upon it.

"The High Council of Deed and Doctrine has seen fit to award me the position as Field Commander," Yarna 'Orgalmee said, walking through the crowd of Sangheili, his gaze jumping from one face to the next. "They would not do this if I was not worthy of the station." He paused in mid-stride long enough to take a plasma sword away from a drunken Councilor before continuing. "My leadership skills obviously have some merit, so I ask that you give me your utmost attention."

A contradictory voice, slightly slurred but not by drink, shouted out from the crowd. "And why should we listen to you?" Yarna turned to regard the owner of the voice, and saw Rtas 'Vadumee, the mangled Spec Ops Commander standing on the opposite side of the room. His silver armor was scuffed and battle-worn. "We already have a very capable leader in the Arbiter."

Many Councilors nodded and murmured their agreement; the Field Commander did not. "The Arbiter," he said, struggling to control his intonation, "cannot lead us in this difficult time. Is it not true that he's away on a very dangerous mission?"

"All of his missions are dangerous," 'Vadumee replied, coming closer. "But yes, he is away, though I do not know what his mission is or where he must go." His green eyes locked with Yarna's dark ones. "That does not mean he cannot lead us."

The golden-armored Elite strode up to his silver-armored counterpart, getting extremely close. "He will die," he hissed. "Like all Arbiters before him, he will die." His voice grew in volume to address the whole gathering. "If we look to the Arbiter for leadership, we will soon find ourselves without a leader!"

A Councilor leaped to his feet. "Surely you trust in the abilities of the Arbiter!"

His colleagues all began voicing this same thing, levying praise upon the current Arbiter. Yarna could barely stomach it. _They want to look to their precious Arbiter? _He began to leave the room, pushing

past Rtas and a group of rowdy councilors. _Fine. Let him lead them to oblivion._

Before passing through the door, he turned back. "Now is not the time for rebellion," he called out. Everyone in the chamber could hear his booming voice. "It may come soon, but it is not time yet."

The golden-armored Elite walked out, maneuvering through hallways crowded with civilians and finally stopped to gaze out a window. Halo spun lazily before the great blue planet, the light reflecting oddly off the metal exterior of the ring. At one point a young Sangheili female, obviously smitten with the possibility of a big, strong military mate, approached him and tenderly put her hands on his arm. He let loose a deep growl and sent the wench scurrying away.

"You know," said someone behind him, "it is not always wise to turn away a female." Yarna glanced over his shoulder to see a councilor standing almost directly behind him. His silver armor took in the strange light much better, and he had removed his helmet.

The Field Commander scoffed. "Come to give me girl advice, or is there another reason?"

Sighing, the Councilor moved up beside him. "Field Commander 'Orgalmee," he began, clasping his hands behind his back, "what do you have against the Arbiter?"

Yarna broke his gaze away from the ring long enough to shoot an alarmed look in the councilor's direction, but quickly recovered. "What makes you think I have anything against the Arbiter, Councilor 'Hayatasha?"

"It could be your little speech in there," 'Hayatasha mused aloud, "it could be your fight with him in the hallway not too long ago, or perhaps it's because of your previous relation to an Arbiter?"

The golden-armored Elite's blood froze. "Please, Yarna," the councilor continued, "you think it is impossible to find this out? It's in your Lineage records, albeit heavily veiled. An intrepid inquirer who was clever enough could find it easily." His mandibles curled upwards into a smile upon seeing the other Sangheili's rigid posture. "There is no shame in it, Field Commander."

"Of course not!" Yarna snapped, his veins reheating rapidly. "I was intensely proud of my grandfather! My father told me what a great man he was!"

"He did not last long," 'Hayatasha noted, and suddenly the Field Commander found himself having to fight back the urge to strangle the politician in his company. "But I agree that he was a grand Arbiter, truly one that the people could rally behind." He paused. "How was he killed, again?"

The golden-armored Elite snarled. "That is not your place to know. You may be a friend of my father's, but that is not a good enough reason to be privy to our family's secrets."

The councilor nodded. "We were right to install you as a Field Commander, for you are fiery and determined," he muttered before taking his leave. He patted Yarna's shoulder as he departed. "Take

care, Yarna."

He was left staring out the window at the bittersweet sight of Halo.

9. Pinned

Chapter 9: Pinned

The Phantom rumbled slightly as it sped in the counterspin direction of Halo, passing over fields and forests that grew increasingly colder and gradually passed into snowfall. It was pure and white, quite the beautiful spectacle if one could spare the time to enjoy it; unfortunately, Balask 'Zakamee had other things on his mind.

Sallius and Briareus were piloting the dropship, leaving the Senior Officer to contemplate his team's assignment. The Arbiter had lowered the shield to the Quarantine Zone to allow access to the Sacred Icon, that device which would begin the Great Journey, but a complication had arisen. Now freed from its prison, the Flood had rallied and begun attacking in force. Recalling the horror of fighting the Parasite on the last Halo, the Covenant had ordered all Special Operations teams to converge on the Quarantine Zone and halt the Flood's advance.

A shudder passed through his mind, remembering his encounters with the Flood on the first Halo. Even though he had been part of an armored unit, he and his comrades had barely escaped each encounter.

"We're approaching our assigned sector," Sallius said, guiding the Phantom.

"Excellent," Balask muttered, "Thank you, Sally."

The Brute growled loudly, but Balask merely turned and entered the troop compartment, chuckling to himself. He regarded the team... no, his team now. His hand unconsciously rose to touch the Etching on his armor's breast but he squelched the reaction. It would do no good to grieve for his dead commander now.

"Are we almost there?" Opom asked.

Balask nodded. "Yes. Is everyone prepared?"

They all checked their equipment. Both Kasa 'Yonomee and himself were carrying two Plasma Rifles each, and the Senior Officer carried his human shotgun while the younger had his Carbine. Sesep had his turret but also had a pair of Plasma pistols in a satchel. Opom carried a Fuel Rod Gun, and Nunot, as the medic, carried only his Plasma Pistol but dragged along a lot of extra medical supplies to treat punctures and burns and flush the nervous system in case an infected soldier could be saved. Two Jackals also accompanied the team, carrying a beam rifle each. In addition to their personal armaments they had four heavy deployable plasma turrets, a crate of extra grenades, and a deployable lookout tower.

"We have arrived," Briareus announced over the Phantom's COM.

"Is the drop zone clear?"

"One minute," the Brute replied, and the soldiers in the bay could feel the persistent thudding of plasma turrets on the underside of the ship firing. After a while they stopped. "You're clear. Drop now, before the Flood returns."

One at a time they dropped off the ship, Kasa and Balask forced to make return trips in order to get the heavy turrets down; in addition, the Phantom carried a deployable tower. They quickly established a tight and contained perimeter, centered on the tower they had set up; the two sniper Jackals and the Fuel Rod Gun-toting Opom had taken refuge in it, receiving a better and more unobstructed view of the battlefield. The space was very much enclosed, with only a small opening into a small valley and the massive wall of the Forerunner containment sector breaking the otherwise steep and natural-looking walls of the area.

"Stay on your guard!" Balask called out as he patrolled the perimeter, gazing out into the twisted and distorted landscape. His advice turned out to be well-timed: almost immediately, tiny bulbs of Infection Forms rushed out of holes in the ground, charging for the encampment. The snipers held their fire, knowing that such pinpoint accuracy weapons would be useless; Opom opened up with the Fuel Rod Gun, sending large burning blobs of green plasma into the horrific creatures' ranks and causing the tower's hovering balcony to sway. Kasa and Balask each jumped into a turret, Nunot and Sesep doing the same, and all fired into the onslaught of Flood. At first the Senior Officer feared that they would be overwhelmed, but thanks to the overlapping fields of fire provided by the turrets and the overhead bombardment by the Fuel Rod Gun the team successfully weathered three full waves of Infection Forms before the creatures stopped pouring up out of the depths.

Nal the Jackal, one of the snipers, gazed through his scope. His partner, Yek, did the same, both of them surveying the surrounding area. After a thorough search, Nal leaned over and called down to Balask: "No sign of the Flood, Excellency!"

Balask nodded. "Everyone, take a quick break to reload your weapons and calm your nerves before the Parasite regroups." They did so, Nunot passing by each soldier and administering capsules filled with a weak sedative before returning to his turret. Despite his lack of self-confidence the little Grunt did his job well.

A full fifteen minutes passed while Blessed Unit waited on edge for the renewed assault, but it did not come. Aside from a few faint blips on the edges of the Elites' motion trackers and the occasional spotting of a distant Infection Form through the snipers' scopes, all was quiet.

That is, until an ungodly shriek shattered the silence and tore into their souls, sending shivers down their spines and chilling each soldier to his very core.

"What in the name of the Revered and Numinous Forerunner was _that?_" Kasa whispered fearfully, nervously turning his turret this way and that. Balask had to admit, to himself, that he didn't know; never had he heard such a terrifying sound.

It was the start of Hell, as they came to realize very quickly.

â€"â€"

Field Commander Yarna 'Orgalme entered the tactical room on High Charity, immediately impressed with what he saw: wall-to-wall displays that had up-to-the-second information on units and teams deployed nearby, holographic maps of areas of conflict with representatives of friendly and hostile forces, dossiers on each foe encountered, and most importantly a wide simulator in the middle of the room where commanders such as himself could put in possible strategies and see how well their AIs believed they would work. Several Elites, Jackals, and Grunts attended to the stations in various colors of armor, all deeply involved with the current conflict. Nodding, he wandered over to another golden-armored Elite who was pouring over recent battlefield telemetry.

"What's the situation?" he asked, peeking over the commander's shoulder.

"Flood containment breach," the other replied, not looking up. "The Arbiter was forced to deactivate the Library's shield during his mission, and it had the unforeseen consequence of releasing the Parasite."

Fighting down the wave of revulsion that accompanied the Arbiter's name he glanced at some of the weapons data. "Have our troops been outfitted with the proper tools to exterminate the creatures?"

The other nodded. "Plasma and Fuel Rod Guns only, some Carbines."

"Energy Rifles will probably also be ineffective."

This comment gave the other pause. "Some of the snipers have been equipped with those."

Yarna shook his head. "We'll have to hope for the best then."

He toured the rest of the room, observing tactical data on the different battles taking place around the Library, the source of the containment breach. Recalling his own experiences with the Flood he advised the other commanders on which strategies would be the most effective. Those who questioned his orders met his eyes, cold and hardened pits of hatred. They quickly came to understand that, when faced with the Parasite, the new Field Commander 'Orgalme was vicious and merciless. In fact, only a direct order from the High Council of Masters kept him from just bombarding the entire area from space.

However, his unwavering hostility softened when he spotted data on one team: OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee's Spec Ops team, which had also been deployed to the Infested Zone. Despite all his horrific memories of the first Halo, he remembered his camaraderie with OrinÃ© and Rurut in a shining light. They had been fast friends, the three of them, and all three had served under Ionill 'Ongyomee in a Spec Ops team.

He watched the mission data scroll in, both information on weapons discharges and a live-feed to a Jackal's visual recorder. He also squinted his eyes at the blurry shapes that moved into view, several of them, running and leaping their way towards Blessed Unit.

"By the Prophets, what _are _those?" asked the Operator who had been watching the feed, but Yarna already knew too well what they were.

But what are they doing here?

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The horrifying screeching tapered off, but in its place were terrifying forms: bipedal bodies, thin and lanky, some with round heads snapped backwards and others upright, but they all had tentacles sprouting from their arms. They leaped impossible distances in a single bound, landing directly in front of the turrets. Balask barely managed to get his wits together long enough to fire, burning down the Combat Form with the plasma bombardment.

Quickly the others shook off their own fear and shock and began firing, tearing into the grotesque monsters before them. The torrent of Infection Forms returned, spilling forth from every shadow and rushing towards the defensive line. More Combat Forms leaped up from the depths, some bearing weapons and unloading them at the group.

_Those are infected humans, _Balask noted as there was a clatter of an SMG and several bullets pinged off the shield of the turret. _And they're using human weapons! How is this possible?_

A Jackal cried a warning to the group, but it was too late: three rocket launchers belched puffs of smoke and high-explosive missiles at the group. One went high and impacted inside the tower while the other two homed in on the Grunts' turrets. Nunot dived out of his seat, avoiding the blast entirely, while Sesep dodged but got peppered with shrapnel. Kasa and his senior refocused their fire on the area where the rockets had fired from, not willing to let them get off more shots.

"Medic!" Opom's voice rang out from the tower, and quickly Nunot was on his feet and floating up the gravity lift after making sure Sesep wasn't too badly hurt.

Balask gave the soldier a bit of time. "Status, Nunot!" he cried out over the sounds of gunfire.

"Both Jackals are down," the Grunt cried out to his commander, "one's wounded, the other dead. Opom's fine, but his Fuel Rod Gun's damaged." The Elite swore. Without the Fuel Rod Gun at their disposal they lacked the heavy weapon necessary to seriously cut down these numbers. With two of the plasma turrets destroyed, the remaining two couldn't hope to properly fend off the Flood.

He keyed his COM. "High Charity, this is Blessed Unit," Balask roared, the energy shield flaring red as several more shots ricocheted off the surface. "We need reinforcements! We are in danger of being completely overrun!"

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Chaos had spread like wildfire throughout the tactical command center. The arrival of Combat Forms had been completely unexpected, the fact that they had all attacked simultaneously _and _they were comprised completely of infected humans not lending any manner of calm. Operators and officers alike were panicking, some trying to order full orbital bombardments despite the Prophets' strict order that the ring was not to be harmed.

Not bothering being pleasant, Yarna began organizing the panicking personnel. "Operators, stay focused," he ordered. "Return to your posts. Commanders, meet with me at the simulator." Somewhat embarrassed, they all did as they were told. A few Field Masters and Commanders, as well as a handful of Majors, crowded around the circular indent in the middle of the room, Yarna joining them.

Tapping a few buttons on a hovering control pad, the function changed to show a large representation of their forces on Halo. Another inputted a command and it focused on those stationed in the Infested Zone. "All right," he began, pointing at a large sector in the middle flashing red. "That is the Library itself. Pull all units currently stationed within there out at once; we cannot waste the resources to try and destroy this infestation at the source. We have neither the time nor firepower." He moved his finger to a line of uncolored landscape. "That valley so far has not been attacked. Reinforce it, send armored convoys through to restore this perimeter here." A circular motion outlined the place he was talking about. "That shall be our main line of defense. Inform the Ghosts to be cautious, they are poorly protected and the Parasite is devious indeed."

"What about Phantoms?" a Major spoke up.

"Use them as gunships. Load all dropships leaving High Charity with troops, supplies, and armor before sending them down, then assign them to bombard the Parasite."

"Excellency!" an Elite Operator called out from across the room. "Blessed through Virtuous Units are calling for reinforcements, and Blessed, Devout, Pious, and Reverent Units are requesting medical evacuations!"

"Send Phantoms to evacuate the wounded and have the city launch a wave of pods to each location," the Field Master ordered. He looked over the holographic landscape before him, praying all the soldiers would make it. So absorbed he became that he barely noted the report made that the Arbiter had broken through the Sentinel Wall at the same time that the pods rained down from the sky.

“”

Seeing the Orbital Drop Pods powering through the atmosphere brought a sense of overpowering relief to Balask's heart. They had just repelled another wave, so the newcomers didn't find themselves surrounded by hostiles the second they came out of their pods.

Six Elites emerged, five wearing the same black armor as Balask and his team and the sixth wearing brilliant silver armor. The Senior Officer recognized him instantly.

"Excellency," he nodded towards Spec Ops Commander 'Vadumee.

"'Zakamee," Rtas replied, making his way up the slight slope to the middle of the encampment. As he went, he looked around; the black-armored Sangheili got the feeling he was looking for something in particular. "What is your status?"

Balask hopped from the turret. "One dead, two wounded. The Flood took out two of our plasma turrets. I've called for a medivac to get the wounded out of here, but I don't know how long it will take for High Charity to respond."

Rtas nodded. "Where is your commander?"

"Excellency?"

"Commander OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee," said the wounded Sangheili. "This is his unit, is it not?"

"Excellency, Commander 'Fulsamee perished in battle on Earth," Balask said.

'Vadumee stared at him for a brief second, and then nodded somberly. "May the Forerunners watch over him," he said. After another moment, he turned to the five Elites that had come with him. "One of you, get up in the tower. The rest spread out and supplement those turrets." He turned back to Balask. "Those turrets must be preserved. They're our best chance at holding the Parasite back."

His orders were carried out quickly and efficiently, even though Nunot periodically bothered the Elite posted in the tower with assisting him in keeping the wounded Jackal alive. Occasionally it shrieked or cried out in pain, but the blood flow had stemmed and, for the moment, it seemed as if it would live.

The Flood returned in their usual swarm a minute or so later, but the squad was not caught unawares. A few infected Elites joined the ranks as well, but the curious majority of human Combat Forms was still present. The plasma turrets opened up and burned through the waves, and the Elites fired their own rifles to ward off the Infection Forms that made it through.

"Keep the fire heavy!" Rtas roared over the sounds of the guns. "Don't let them get close!" Off in the distance there was a puff of smoke, and immediately all the people on the ground scrambled for cover. The rocket struck the middle of the encampment, not hurting anyone but forcing the soldiers out from behind their cover and into the open. More Combat Forms jumped down to attack, with the rocket-wielding form still firing into the mass. The line that they had worked so hard to make and maintain was quickly broken up. Several Elites, realizing that it was close combat from here on out, activated their Energy Swords and began to melee their way through the waves of enemies.

The battle quickly degenerated from an organized defense into a brutal melee.

Balask, drawing his own sword, looked over the carnage and shivered.

He doubted they could hold; their numbers were too little and their tactics were too desperate. He cleaved an attacking Combat Form in half and then swept the blade through a wave of Infection Forms. Several deformed Elites and humans began to rush him, but if he lunged with the sword then he would be surrounded; instead he pulled out his shotgun and emptied it at the incoming abominations, dropping almost the entire wave before he ran out of shells.

_We are doomed, _Balask had begun to lament when suddenly he heard several shots ring out. From a cave in the far earthen wall charged another group of Elites. They began carving away at the Flood from behind. This small break allowed 'Vadumee's and Balask's teams to regain their previous positions, Kasa and another Elite manning the remaining turrets. The new arrivals continued to fight their way through the Flood, eventually linking up with the Elites on the inside.

When they grew close, Balask felt his breath leave him. These soldiers were being led by the Arbiter himself, clad in ceremonial armor and clutching his energy sword in hand. He looked for all the worlds like one of the heroes of legend.

"Circular formation!" the Arbiter cried out, and immediately the Elites present jumped to the fortifications. There were two more waves, each heralded by the unholy shrieks of the Parasite, but with the combined leadership of both the Arbiter and Rtas they were successfully repelled.

Finally, there was silence. No Flood, no fighting, merely the snow falling around the soldiers. A collective sigh of relief was uttered as the sublime peace settled in and the faint sound of a Phantom's engine could be heard.

"Arbiter," the silver-armored 'Vadumee approached the ornate hero, "what are you doing here?" The Phantom appeared over the cliff walls and zoomed in to a hover. Immediately Balask's team got to work loading the wounded onto the craft and detaching the vehicles it had brought with it.

"At the center of this zone is a Sacred Icon critical to the Great Journey," the Arbiter said in his baritone voice. "I must find it."

Rtas nodded, his hand balling into a fist. "We will cut into the heart of this infestation," he began, turning to the assembled troops, "retrieve the Icon, and burn any Flood that stand in our way!" All the Elites raised their voices in a glorious cry, eagerly anticipating the battle to come.

As the two heroes continued to converse, Balask turned to his team and issued the orders. "Kasa, you are to remain with me and the other Elites as we search for this Sacred Icon. The rest of you," he indicated the Grunts, "get on that Phantom and head back to High Charity. You have done all you can and deserve your rest."

Not bothering to argue, they saluted and rode the gravity lift up into the dropship that then sped up into the sky. The two remaining Elites from Blessed Unit turned and boarded a nearby Spectre, the younger manning the turret while the Senior Officer jumped behind the driving controls.

Kasa could not help himself. "Lead on, Arbiter!" he called out to the legendary warrior.

10. Heart of Hearts

Chapter 10: Heart of Hearts

As the group of Elites boarded their vehicles and began their infiltration of the Library, trouble was already brewing on High Charity. The Brute chieftain, unbeknownst to all except for the Prophet of Truth who had suggested it, had given orders to all his Brute warriors to begin "securing the city." Wave after wave of massive, hairy beasts marched through the upper and lower sectors of the holy city, pushing aside all those who stood in their way, be they Grunts or Jackals or even Hunters.

"By order of the Prophets," they would sneer at anyone who questioned them, after which they savagely beat or arrest the offender, the latter of which also beget a savage beating. Slowly, from within, the beasts were seizing an opportunity that had been granted to them by the highest power.

Locked away in the tactical room, Field Commander Yarna 'Orgalmee didn't realize it at first. He was too preoccupied in coordinating the efforts to contain the Flood that, initially, he barely realized that a sizeable force had entered the room. Once he caught a whiff of them, however, and realized they were Jiralhanae, all his focus was immediately on them.

"What are you doing in here?" Yarna growled, seeing Jobrinus at the front of the pack. "Filthy creatures such as yourselves have no place here. Be gone with you!"

"By order of the Prophets," the Brute recited, "all Elite commanders are to be placed under arrest. You and yours will come with us."

A cool feeling descended over the room as all eyes turned towards the Brutes. The Zealots tensed, being experienced enough to know when something had gone wrong. Eventually quiet descended over the entire room, Operators looking away from their stations to focus on the growing tensions.

Slowly the Sangheili were being consumed by rage. "Jiralhanae, take the place of us? Not even the entire lot of you could measure up to a single Sangheili commander!"

Jobrinus raised his weapon, a Brute Shot. "Though we thoroughly enjoy it," he growled, "we are under orders to take your posts." The ape-like creatures all drew their weapons, primarily plasma rifles and Carbines.

The Elites replied in kind, swords flashing to life. Yarna eyed his rival warily, drawing his own sword and activating it. His conversation with the Prophet of Mercy bubbled to the surface of his memories, and a cold sensation grabbed his hearts. "In which Hierarch's name do you perform this heresy?"

"In the name of Truth."

The Elite hung his head. "Very well then," he muttered. There was a click as Jobrinus cycled a round, and all hell broke loose. Both sides erupted in their individual cries and challenges, but neither wasted any time in moving to gain the advantage. The lizard-like Sangheili charged the leathery and hairy Jiralhanae, plasma flying, grenades detonating, and swords burning.

Yarna singled out his target: Jobrinus seemed to be leading this particular raid, though he was sure this entire movement ran much deeper. Regardless, he focused on the here-and-now, which included gutting the damnable ape from head to toe. With a mighty roar he lunged for the Brute, blade outstretched; his opponent, seeing the attack coming, was able to sidestep just in time and trip the Elite, sending him tumbling for the ground. Before he could press the advantage, however, the golden-armored warrior rolled to one side and sprang back to his feet, slashing backward through the throat of another Brute as he went.

Realizing that Yarna was just as fast as he looked to be, Jobrinus began moving backwards through the riotous crowd, firing his Brute Shot. The grenades ricocheted around, sometimes striking his enemies and sometimes his allies, but panic was beginning to seize his mind. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see that, despite the Jackals coming to the aid of the Brutes, the Elites were winning nonetheless. He had honestly hoped they would have just given up by now.

These thoughts cost him dearly as he suddenly realized his clip was empty and the Zealot was right in front of him. He tossed the weapon at the Elite and dropped down to his knees and knuckles, preparing to charge. Yarna slashed the grenade launcher in half, bending his own knees and preparing to meet the charge. As the Brute pounded forward, roaring his challenge, Yarna jumped up and slashed down, cleaving his opponent's skull down the middle. Blood and brains spilled out onto the floor in a very satisfying pattern.

With their leader dead it didn't take long for the rest of the Brutes to be killed and the traitorous and cowardly Jackals to be rounded up. Observing the carnage, the surviving Sangheili began to try and make sense out of what had just happened.

"This is an act of war by the Jiralhanae," a Major said, kicking one of the hairy corpses.

"We are truly betrayed," a Field Master lamented, gazing at the blood on the deck. Not all of it belonged to the Brutes; Elite and Grunt blood was mixed there as well. "The Covenant has turned its back on us! Have we been forsaken by the Gods?"

Yarna shook his head. "No," he reassured the others, "we are not excommunicated. The Jiralhanae have gone blind, however, and have failed to see our superiority. Now they will pay the price." He turned to the soldiers who had assembled nearby. "Spread the word! The time to act has come. Our first priority must be to secure the Councilors; after that, we will exterminate the Brutes." They thought highly of that plan and roared in approval before leaving, Yarna following suit.

As battles ignited across High Charity and the Sangheili took up arms against the Jiralhanae, less and less attention could be spared, and

eventually the warriors on the surface of Halo were all but forgotten.

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The small column of armored vehicles, composed of a Spectre and two Ghosts, worked its way through the Sentinel Wall. Already it had faced several Enforcers, entire fleets of Sentinels, and wave after wave of Flood. The Parasite knew how to operate vehicles, it seemed, so the Covenant convoy was continuously slowed and greatly damaged. Bullet holes and plasma burns were spread all over the surface of the Spectre, and one of the Ghosts was so heavily damaged that it listed slightly to one side.

Kasa 'Yonomee swiveled the turret side to side, searching for more targets. They had just worked their way down a curving, snowy pathway and fought through Sentinels and Flood to reach the bottom, whereupon they encountered more of the same.

Up ahead, the Arbiter had disembarked from his Ghost in order to scout the area. He came back and hopped in his craft, signaling everyone else to move ahead. Two large metal shutters parted as they approached and revealed a large and horrifying battlefield: three Wraith tanks, captured by the Parasite, were lobbing plasma in wide arcs at the Library in the distance. The building was burning, and the Elites looked on with horror as a Forerunner ship that had been floating around it was struck with one too many mortar shots and slowly plunged, bathed in flame, beneath the horizon. A resounding boom echoed through the canyons, the snow beneath them rumbling with the impact.

"Damnable creatures!" Balask 'Zakamee, the Senior Officer of Blessed Unit, cried out, "To destroy the wondrous artifacts of the Forerunners!"

_How dare they indeed, _Kasa thought. His thoughts had slowly been turning more and more blasphemous. If the Prophets were wrong, how right could the mythology be? After all, had it not been the Prophets that ended the war by showing his ancestors the eminence of the Forerunners? So there was a possibility that the Forerunner weren't actually at all distinguished.

Glancing around, the Elite wished that Opom or Nunot were nearby to console him, but they had been sent back to High Charity. So, for now, he lent his voice to the chorus of outraged cries for blood.

The Arbiter, noticing a nearby Wraith tank, leaped from his Ghost and charged for the Flood-manned vehicle. He clambered onto it, crawling up the back and situating himself over the hatch before proceeding to pound it with his Plasma Rifle. After a few good whacks the hatch came loose and he plunged his hand into the cockpit, pulling the Infection Form free from the infected occupant and then disposed of the rotting corpse. As he climbed in and started the tank up an Elite hopped from the side-seat of the Spectre and manned the unclaimed Ghost.

Kasa had seen these heroics from the Arbiter several times now. He acted with certainty, but at the same time he detected a hint of sorrow. The warrior charged into battle and seemed not to fear for

his own well being; when he came out alive, he seemed almost disappointed. But behind that was a definite strength that was also hauntingly familiar.

With the extra strength in the column they labored on, crossing a ravine by way of a ruined tunnel of some kind. Unfortunately, an unpleasant surprise was waiting on the other side.

"Rockets!" cried out the lead Ghost pilot before a cloud of fire enveloped the Elite and his craft, scorched and burned remains being blasted every which way. Immediately Kasa and the other Ghost opened fire on the approximate position of the Combat Form with the rocket launcher, but their weapons were too precise and the Wraith couldn't fire its mortar until it cleared the ruins of the tunnel.

There was another puff of smoke, but it was of much poorer aim and only struck the ground near the Spectre; yet it was enough to force the vehicle up onto only two of its anti-gravity pods, throwing off the Elite gunner's aim.

"Hold on!" Balask cried a little too late as the remaining Elite sitting on the side was hurled from the vehicle and Kasa only managed to stay in by grabbing the turret as he fell. The warrior from Blessed Unit looked on helplessly as the passenger landed hard, his neck at an odd angle. Uttering a quick prayer, he threw his weight into the tipping vehicle in order to force it back onto all three fields.

As he did this the three-craft column continued to inch forward under more and more fire as Combat Forms jumped up and opened fire with their miscellaneous weapons. The clatter of machine guns and bark of Battle Rifles preceded the solid projectiles bouncing off the hardened armor of the vehicles, while the whine of plasma-based weapons gave away the boiling substance splashing off the frames before they impacted. Whenever they heard the telltale discharge of a rocket launcher the Ghost and Spectre would swerve and boost out of the way to avoid the explosive projectile.

Finally, the Arbiter's Wraith cleared the tunnel ceiling and was able to begin lobbing its plasma mortars into the crowds of Flood, incinerating the Parasite with each massive blast. As the roiling fire ate up the rocket-launching Combat Form the two other vehicles were able to move more freely and began cutting through the waves of enemies.

As they crawled onward they realized an important fact: their armored column of one Spectre, one Wraith, and one Ghost couldn't stand up to the armored might of Flood with two Wraiths and several rocket launchers. So the Arbiter and Balask agreed on a course of action: lean on the boosters and run the entire area. It turned out to be easier than anticipated, as the Combat Forms busied themselves by fighting the Sentinels and Enforcers that were making their way into the area and the tanks busy bombarding the Library. So with speed on their side the column rushed through the Flood siege and entered a tunnel. From the way the supports were damaged and the fact that all the walls seemed burned the Elites could only surmise that the Parasite had used some sort of incendiary device to burn its way through the walls. Upon exiting the tunnel, that was confirmed.

What the space used to be was some sort of Sentinel factory, a place

where they could be constructed, armed, and then sent out to corral the Flood. Now it was a smoking ruin, still-burning embers everywhere. The Flood were engaged in yet another battle, so the Elites left their vehicles and snuck past on foot. Finding an entranceway, they slipped through using their active camouflage. Moving through the remains of the factory, whether they be enflamed ruins or areas exposed to the outside weather, and engaging the Parasite or the Sentinels only when it couldn't be avoided prevented any further fatalities on the side of the Covenant.

Kasa couldn't keep his breath from coming in short, ragged gasps. The horrors he had seen here, of the Flood and the Sentinels and the massive amount of destruction, would undoubtedly stay with him the rest of his life. How could these disgusting and terrifying Parasites be at all related to the Forerunners? What was the connection? He had heard a few stories during his time in Institution, but they were often contradictory. Some had suggested that the Flood had been a failed genetic project of the Forerunners, others said that they had been a creature that killed all of their lords; one had even gone so far as to suggest that the Flood were the Forerunner, but he had been executed for heresy.

Finally, the four Elites broke through to the other side. Two enemy Ghosts and one Wraith were waiting for them and took them by surprise. With disarming speed the two craft opened fire: blue-white plasma cut through their ranks, wounding Balask and killing the other Elite that had been traveling with them. Under the barrage of energy the group fell back, taking shelter behind what appeared to be human supply crates; despite their odd choice of cover, the only thought to pierce their minds was the realization that they would die here.

Then the Arbiter showed his true abilities. Leaping up onto the crate and brandishing his energy sword, he rushed one of the Ghosts. The Flood inside turned the craft to fire but, with a leap the Arbiter was on top of him. Drawing back the blade he plunged it into the Parasite and eradicated the body. Jumping into the vacant seat he quickly turned the Ghost against the other vehicle of the same class and took it down quickly. With the distractions out of the way, he began circling the Wraith, firing while dodging the anti-infantry turrets and the ramming of the tank. Finally a blue-white fire blossomed from the depths of the vehicle, signaling an end to the Flood operator.

"By the Rings," Kasa muttered to his wounded Senior Officer. The motion, the grace, and the savage beauty of the attack; it was like a careful dance. Again he found it familiar, something about the Arbiter tickling his mind, but he couldn't quite place it.

Balask merely nodded his assent, clutching the slowly-bleeding wound. With the coast clear, the two members of Blessed Unit followed at a slow jog behind the Arbiter's Ghost as it moved out into the open. Once again they found themselves in the crossfire of a Flood-Sentinel battle, the Parasite this time employing the use of human vehicles to fight off the robotic inhabitants of Halo.

"How can we move through this battle?" Kasa called out to the Arbiter as he and Balask ducked behind a rock, bullets from the rear-mounted gun on a Warthog shredding the area around them.

"I do not know," the Arbiter replied, turning his Ghost to engage the Flood, "but will improvise. We must reach the Icon." Kasa nodded, fully aware that the other Elite couldn't see the gesture.

A familiar hum filled the air, and all three Elites looked up to see a Phantom come low overhead. The bottom plasma turrets warmed up and began pounding the Flood and Sentinels, the superheated plasma easily powering through the Parasite and managing to temporarily fend off the metal abominations. While the Arbiter boosted over to the Phantom in a manner of seconds, the other two Elites ran as fast as they could and made it in under a minute.

Commander 'Vadumee was waiting for them. "Status?"

"Excellency," Balask began, his voice openly displaying his exhaustion, "we have lost two warriors to the Flood and several vehicles, but our odyssey towards the Icon is progressing ever forward."

"No it isn't," Rtas replied, putting a hand on Balask's shoulder. "Take your Junior Officer and board the Phantom. The Arbiter and I will handle it from here." He indicated the newly-dropped Spectre. Balask nodded and saluted, but as he walked past the Spec Ops Commander brushed the warrior's elbow.

"Be wary of the Brutes," he whispered into the Senior Officer's ear. "Something is happening on High Charity; be prepared for betrayal." Nodding again, this time more solemnly, he and Kasa went up the gravity lift into the dropship.

Within were the two Brutes, Briareus and Sallius, in the cockpit along with several wounded Elites. Some were considerably more wounded than others, but all in all there were about seven other Elites in the troop bay. Shrugging off the younger soldier, Balask walked into the cockpit and eyed the Brutes.

"Where are we going?" he asked, suspicion sneaking into his voice.

"Back to High Charity," Sallius replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the galaxy. "We will drop off the wounded, pick up more troops, and come back."

Nodding, the black-armored Sangheili retreated back to the troop bay. Some of the soldiers tried to manage salutes, but he waved them down. After what they had been through, as far as he was concerned they were all his equals. Settling himself against a magnetic wall panel, Balask allowed himself to doze.

â€œâ€œ"

A while later, a sudden tremble of turbulence brought him back to consciousness. Glancing around, he saw that a few Elites had also woken but were trying to get back to sleep. Disengaging his armor he entered the cockpit, the door sliding open silently.

A transmission rang through just as he stepped in, evidently the voice of the Jiralhanae chieftain: "I have executed the Arbiter. Dropships cease circling and arrest the Sangheili aboard. If they resist, kill them." Instantly Balask's combat senses kicked in, but

the Brutes were already rising and turning. They brought up their plasma rifles, crimson in color, and smiled widely.

"Back to the troop bay with you, filth," Briareus growled. Balask grudgingly complied, but as his feet crossed the threshold he called out in the clearest voice he could:

"Warriors, awaken! Prepare for battle!" Instantly Sallius raised his rifle and clubbed him hard in the head. The Senior Officer staggered back and fell to the deck, his head hammering and a trickle of blood coming out from under his helmet. However, around him the battle in the cramped space began and, just as quickly, ended. In the time it took for the Brute to bludgeon Balask, the other Elites were able to disengage themselves from the wall and bring up their rifles and sidearms. Before the Brutes could even crack off a shot the air was filled with blue and green plasma bolts. Two thoroughly burned Jiralhanae flopped to the ground, and two of the less-injured Elites stepped over them and entered the cockpit.

Kasa quickly helped his unit leader up, removing his helmet and treating the injury. There was a quick flash of static, and an Elite's voice came over the dropship's radio. "We will _really_ be returning to High Charity now. Get ready for more combat; I'm certain that we will not be receiving the warmest of greetings."

Another Sangheili toed Sallius's body with his hoof; the pitiful thing moaned in agony. "He still breathes," the Elite Operative said, raising his rifle.

"Wait," Balask said, motioning for him to stop. He turned towards the cockpit. "Bring us close to the ground." The pilot did so, and the Phantom took up a hovering station three meters above the snowy terrain. The Senior Officer limped over to a control panel and activated the gravity lift. He nodded towards the Brutes. "Leave them for the Parasite."

A minute later, the Phantom climbed into the sky, leaving two wounded and helpless Jiralhanae to the mercy of the Flood.

â€"â€"

Yarna 'Orgalmee realized that the task of protecting the Councilors would prove extremely difficult. The Hierarchs had already sent the order for them to gather on the sacred ring to observe the consecration of the Icon; however, as the Elites still controlled many of the important systems of the city he sent instructions to the Sangheili already on the Ring to fight against the Brutes and secure the politicians, as well as sending a strike force to Halo just in case those already present failed.

Meanwhile, High Charity itself needed guidance. It was obvious where the divisions were: the Jackals and Drones had sided with the Brutes and Prophets. This came as little surprise, as the Kig-Yar were mercenaries who would follow the money and the Yanme'e were very simple-minded.

At first there had been fears that the Hunters would also throw their lot in with them, but for whatever motive they had decided to assist the Elites. When asked, none would divulge an answer. There had also been lesser fears that the Grunts would be pulled into the ranks of

the dissenters, but as it turned out they ostracized the diminutive creatures because of their apparent lack of worth. With the Covenant now split, action was to be taken.

After the first tremors of betrayal passed, the Sangheili had been quietly and discreetly preparing for conflict. At Field Commander 'Orgalmee's word the Elites dug their heels in, threw up barricades, and immediately went on the defense. One of his more controversial decisions, the heavy fortification of the Lower Districts where the Grunts and Jackals lived, but it turned out for the best: the Jackals were easy to either kill or subdue, and the limited access points proved easily defensible. It quickly became the best fallback point for any Sangheili on the run from Brute patrols.

Now focusing on coordinating the loyal soldiers within the holy city, Yarna grunted in frustration when a Major burst into his room. He looked up from his terminals and was about to demand an explanation when the offending Elite explained himself:

"The Arbiter is dead!" he wailed, "He has been killed by the damnable Brute Chieftain, Tartarus!"

For a moment, Yarna's head swam. Conflicting emotions threatened to overwhelm his senses: a feeling of satisfaction mixed with shame, as well as desperation. As much as he hated the Arbiter, his services and leadership abilities would have been very beneficial. However, perhaps he would still be useful even in death.

"Did he die valiantly?" Field Commander 'Orgalmee asked, keeping his tone neutral.

The Major nodded. "He was defending the Sacred Icon after having taken it from a pair of humans."

Yarna considered this. "Then tell his story to the troops, make them understand the sacrifice he made! His example shall be our guiding light! All we do will be in his name!" The Major stood straighter, nodded and saluted, and rushed out of the makeshift command center.

The Field Commander stared after him, and then returned to his work. _I must be careful, _he cautioned himself as he issued an order to move equipment to the towers. _I, myself, almost began to believe what I was saying._

â€"â€"

Opom reclined in the dormitory, stretching his unarmored limbs and delighting in the abundance of methane around him. His comrades, Nunot and Sesep, were both engaging in a traditional Unggoy game, one in which the players had to successfully outmaneuver each other's holographic nobutel beasts and reach the other end of the playing field. It was similar to a Sangheili game, but this had less "pieces" and much less complicated objectives.

The dormitory was home to a couple hundred Grunts, but currently only around fifty were lounging about. Most of the others were dead, and some were off on duty; the release of the Flood and the presence of the humans had resulted in double shifts and higher casualties.

Before he could settle himself into a nap, there was a loud thumping outside, followed by heavy plasma fire. All the Grunts looked up in curiosity: they had gotten the feeling something was out of place, but hadn't been able to pinpoint it. Now there was shooting outside the dormitory? A few squeaked in alarm.

A minute later two Elite Minors burst into the room, each with an oxygen breather fixed to his face. They glanced around, seemingly disappointed by the small number of troops within, but all the Grunts had their eyes fixed on the weapons held by the Elites. They held a plasma rifle each, both just completing a vent-cycle after overheating; one couldn't fire a plasma weapon inside a methane-filled room, otherwise it would ignite and explode in a very violent manner.

However, a loud banging interrupted the paranoid thoughts of the soldiers and the two Elites turned around, obviously frightened. The door burst open and a rampaging Brute charged in with a bloodthirsty look on his face; unfortunately, that was all he wore, with no breather. His eyes went wide with surprise and his arms began flailing, hands reaching for something that wasn't there. A moment later his face turned dark, his eyes rolled up, and the Brute sagged to the floor. All the inhabitants of the room stared at the body, stupefied by the former creature's stupidity.

The Elites quickly shook off the shock and motioned towards the Grunts. "Gear up and come with us!" Responding quickly, each Unggoy dashing over to the equipment rack and beginning to suit up. Several of the Minors were quaking with fear, but the Spec Ops Grunts didn't let themselves get distracted by thought or emotion: they had orders, and they would follow them. Securing their armor and breathers, they all grabbed up weapons and followed the Elites out into the streets.

The Lower Districts were ordinarily packed with civilians, Unggoy and Kig-Yar going from shop to shop or trudging down through the lanes with children in tow. However, it was almost completely deserted; the soldiers caught movements behind windows and in shadows, but other than that they seemed to be alone.

"Excellency," Opom hazarded as they marched through the seemingly abandoned city, "What's happened? Where is everyone?"

"Evacuated or in hiding," one of the Elites responded, keeping a careful lookout ahead. "The Prophets have betrayed us, and the Brutes and Jackals have taken up arms against us." Off in the distance, a firefight erupted. The distinct whine of plasma weapons and the crack of Brute Shots filled the air, as well as a few dying screams. Several of the Grunts now cowered, including Nunot, but Sesep did his best to bring the poor warrior back up to spirit.

Moving onward, they quickly came across an intersection where a small squad of Brutes had just finished off a group of Elites and Grunts. They had lost a couple of soldiers, leaving only three of the ape-like warriors. Immediately the two Elite Minors roared the order to fire, and the Unggoy raised their weapons and depressed the firing contacts. Blue and green plasma filled the air, the whistling of pink needles joining in. Another Brute fell, but the other two dived behind cover. They screamed their own challenge and tossed plasma

grenades. One landed nearby, another adhered to an unfortunate Grunt Major. They both detonated, killing five Grunts and wounding one of the Elites. Quickly the column split up and found cover the buildings nearby.

Opom and Sesep leaped into a small shop just as crimson plasma stitched its way up the walkway just outside. Three other Grunts dove in shortly after, a several grenades detonating just outside. Ducking their heads, the two Spec Ops Grunts signaled the others to run upstairs and provide covering fire as they poked their arms out and fired randomly at the Brutes' positions. The crimson fire from the Brutes' weapons flashed in response, bolts of plasma melting away the Grunts' cover.

"Does anyone have a turret?" Opom called out over the radio.

There were several negative responses. "How can we possibly hope to hold out against them without a turret?" the diminutive Spec Ops warrior demanded.

"We will have to wait for salvation from outside," one of the Elites said. "Until then, keep firing! May the Forerunners take us in glory!"

â€"â€"

Explosions flashed across the space around High Charity as Elite- and Brute-controlled ships clashed with one another. Plasma torpedoes tore through the blackness, homing in on the enemy and hammering the shields; thousands of Seraph fighters swarmed and attacked, blowing each other out of existence.

The Phantom piloted by the squadron of Spec Ops Elites flew through the inferno, dodging fire and fending off would-be attackers. They quickly linked up with other like-minded survivors of the Brutes' treachery.

"They attacked us for no reason!" a deep voice roared over the radio.

"It has happened to many," Balask responded. "Signal your allies to rendezvous with us just outside the dropship bays, Major, and we will fight our way back inside."

"Affirmative, Excellency."

In total, twenty-three Phantoms loaded with troops reconnoitered in the vacuum just beyond the walls of High Charity. Sixty-nine plasma turrets warmed and fired, melting the bay doors to slag and forcibly ejecting all the occupants out into space. The ships swarmed in, filling the space with their combined mass before activating the emergency force-fields and repressurizing the bays. As they dropped their passengers and cargo, the inside of the compartments became a battleground: Brutes, Jackals, and Drones ran in to engage the disembarking Elites, Grunts, and Hunters. A handful of dropships that hadn't yet set down began firing their turrets at the encroaching enemies.

Balask 'Zakamee immediately began getting the situation under control. As the aged warrior took tactical control of the situation,

directing the troops to set up barriers and dig in, Kasa 'Yonomee took the Spec Ops team present and began to subvert the Brutes' lines from behind. They engaged their active camouflage, flashed on their energy swords, and began slicing through the traitors with ease. In twenty minutes the battle was over.

"Quickly!" Balask bellowed, still clutching at his sore wound, "We must press forward! We have allies in the Lower Districts. We shall regroup with our forces there." Leaving a force behind to guard the bay, the massive force moved onward, fighting their way through halls that had never in their entire creation seen bloodshed; now it was stained with the blacks and blues of Covenant brothers.

As they entered the Lower Districts, the expanse of the city grew up around them. The buildings were all around four stories each with some exceptions sprinkled around here and there. Immediately the tactics changed: half the Hunters were put in the front to act as shock troops and the remainder placed in the back; Elites took up command positions throughout the formation and Grunts filled in the empty spaces.

Suddenly the radio crackled to life in Balask's ear. "Warrior 'Zakamee, this is Field Commander 'Orgalme; respond."

"This is 'Zakamee," the Spec Ops soldier replied. "Go ahead, Excellency."

"I'm splitting your platoon," the Field Commander said calmly, "I'm redirecting most of them to our defense lines and up into the towers to fight the Brutes; you may take a pair of Hunters, four Elites, and a full clutch of Grunts to rendezvous with the rest of your squad. They are currently pinned down at intersection 7-Godly-15. Afterwards, contact me for your assignment."

"Affirmative, Excellency," the Spec Ops Warrior replied, and glanced around. Several of the high-ranking Sangheili in the group had apparently gotten the same message, and began forming the troops into squads. As quickly as he could, he set about rounding up Kasa and securing the troops he would need: two Hunters, four Elites, and eight Grunts. With that, they set off at a heavy jog.

â€"â€"

The Brutes had received reinforcements, much to Opom's dismay. Nunot was rushing around inside the besieged dwelling, tending to the Grunts who needed it. On the other side of the street, the Elites and the Grunts with them were putting up a fight, but it was proving extremely difficult: sniper fire had brought down two of the diminutive soldiers, and the Drones who had recently flown in were making it incredibly hard to find constant and reliable cover.

"Yanme'e," Opom muttered, looking up at the buzzing insectoids. "I never thought they'd be any good in combat." Glancing around, it was obvious that they were doomed. Between the Brutes' viciousness and the Jackals' defensive shields, the only thing that was keeping their enemies from advancing was a prayer.

Suddenly he heard intensified plasma firing, and he knew this was it: their big charge. Soon a giant ugly creature would come crashing

through that door, bellow its victory, and shoot them all dead. _Fortunately, _he consoled himself, _this whole ordeal will be over in seconds._

The door did indeed burst open and an ugly thing did leap through, but it wasn't a Brute. The face of his commanding officer looked down on him with intensity. "Quickly!" Balask yelled, motioning to them with his Carbine, "While we have them surprised, we have to get underway!" To accentuate his order, a bright purple beam sizzled through the air right past his head and bore into the floor. Turning, he raised his weapon and fired three times. Across the street one of the Jackals screamed and plummeted to his demise.

Running outside, Balask quickly guided them to more cover, but these had been the Brutes' barricades. Up ahead, two Hunters were demolishing a building with their massive Fuel Rod Cannons while a few Elites and a handful of Grunts swept through the nearby domiciles. Opom and Nunot quickly found Sesep and Kasa, and with Balask their team was once again complete.

"What now, Excellency?" Opom questioned as they crouched up against the barricades. In the distance, there was the quick buzz of plasma and answering zips from a Carbine.

Balask merely waved his hand for silence, and keyed the radio for 'Orgalmee's frequency. There was a long pause, during which the sounds of battle intensified around them and a few of the nearby troops jogged off to lend a hand in nearby sections, but finally the Field Commander picked up.

"Go ahead," the scratchy voice came back.

"Excellency, it is 'Zakamee," the Spec Ops Senior Officer said, "What are your orders?"

There was another lengthy pause, and for a moment Balask could swear he heard gunfire on the other end. "Say again, Warrior," grunted the Field Commander.

"We need orders!" he yelled into the radio.

"Secure tower twelve," came the response, much quicker than last time. "Send the infantry to rendezvous with Commander 'Vadumee, they'll be needed on a mission to the surface of the ring." There was another pause, and a loud cracking sound. "I must leave. While in the towers, keep an eye out for Bruteâ€" The signal was suddenly cut off. For a moment, the Senior Officer stared at the radio in confusion before suddenly he heard a distant crack. Glancing up, he watched a fading sapphire flare down the street.

"Cover!" Balask called out before a blue-white globule of plasma struck one of the buildings facing the intersection. The windows exploded outward and the upper part melted to slag as debris was cast about by a gust of hot air. The Spec Ops team crouched further behind the barriers and the remaining Grunts took cover inside buildings or behind the Hunters. A heat wave roiled through the air but quickly died down.

"Artillery," Kasa hissed, glancing around. "Where did it come from?"

The leader looked up and saw a globule of white-hot plasma flying up from the towers around the city and begin its arc downward. _So that's why he wants us to take them. _"From the towers!" he bellowed as the deadly heat smashed into the center of the street, vaporizing the metal beneath it and heaving two unfortunate Unggoy through the air.

He pointed at the Elite Majors crouched in the doorway of a building. "You!" he shouted at them, more artillery shots falling down into the districts. "Take these warriors and head for the dropship bays! You have a new mission under Commander 'Vadumee." The Major nodded, signaled the troops, and they began running to their objective while simultaneously avoiding being hit by artillery.

"Our team," Balask turned back to the Spec Ops soldiers, "will move up the towers to the twelfth section and secure it." The ground rumbled as another shot landed nearby, but it seemed that the Brutes in charge of the turrets were walking the plasma up the street following the infantry. _I hate to use my team like this, _the Senior Officer thought to himself; they had been fighting for very long. _But we must accomplish our mission. _"We must stop the artillery barrage if we hope to be able to retaliate against the Brutes and retake High Charity."

"What is our support, Excellency?" Opom asked, glancing up as more blue plasma arced overhead.

The Elite shook his head. "We are on our own. I assume that other teams will be taking out the other thirteen tower sections, but we alone will be responsible for ours." The ground rumbled once more, and Balask looked up again to judge the fire: most likely the artillery turrets were being manned by Jiralhanae while Kig-Yar snipers spotted targets for them; they probably also had Huragok to help work the machines, as the Sangheili was certain that the Brutes were too stupid to work the machines themselves.

_Underestimating your enemy is the quickest way to death, _he recalled the words of his instructor at the Institution, _so let this mistake fall only to the fools and the cowards. _Nodding to himself, he began to formulate a plan in his mind.

"Active camouflage on," he commanded, and quickly his squad faded from view. "We must move quickly to reach the gravity lifts before they are shut down. Replace all your batteries and ammunition if you can; we may not have a chance to replenish any time soon.

"Warriors, onward!"

11. Onwards, Upwards, and Downwards

Chapter 11: Onward, Upward, and Downward

Outside the temporary Elite command structure a street battle raged. Five teams of Hunters were hunkered down, taking and repelling Brute and Jackal fire as squads of Grunts and Elites poured suppressing plasma upon their assailants. Whenever they got the chance, the armored Lekgolo fired green radioactive death into the approaching forces, destroying vehicles and buildings and roaring with laughter

as they did it. To the walking worm colonies, the Covenant had always been nothing more than an amusement: they let the Elites think that they had "tamed" them, but their race would live on no matter what came, be it "salvation" or "damnation." This recent turn of events involving "betrayal" and "excommunication" hardly affected them psychologically and just gave them an excuse to exercise their true strength. Indeed, even before this outbreak of internal violence, the Hunters had cared little for the other Covenant clients, only regarding the Elites with any manner resembling respect. The only thing that mattered to a Lekgolo was his mate, his Bond Brother.

Field Commander Yarna 'Orgalmee watched the battle with an intense interest. It was a microcosm of the larger conflict, pockets of Elites, Grunts, and Hunters all over High Charity digging in and holding against the growing tides. Unfortunately, separated as they were they couldn't hope to last forever, so his duty was to get all still loyal to his kind into the Lower Districts and then out into space, where they could regroup. There was also a large-scale battle between Elite- and Brute-controlled ships in progress in the void over the sacred ring, but Yarna was certain it would end in their favor: Jiralhanae could not properly grasp the intricacies of space warfare.

In the meantime, he had to secure a route for the loyal forces to gather here, and that involved taking control of as many of the towers as he could. In the distance bright sapphire flashes roared and rumbled, the artillery from said towers raining down on his forces fighting in the streets.

"Damn," he muttered, and turned to consult the holographic map of High Charity hovering nearby with a few Elite Majors gathered around it. It was not a combat-oriented representation, meant instead for pilgrims, and was cluttered with religious markers and political trivia. Snorting, the Field Commander spared a thought on how close "trivia" came to "trivial." He had been raised to fight and to lead, and that was it. He worshipped the Forerunner by crushing the humans, but now doubt ate at the back of his mind. The Prophets had led his race but now turned against them; what faith was left?

One of the Majors growled. "This artillery will tear us apart! How can we stop it soon? We need to pull together the pockets of resistance still remaining and form a perimeter around the hangars."

"There are many Special Operations teams nearby," Yarna informed them, "though they are scattered. I'll give them assignments to take the towers while our forces begin to pull back." He nodded towards the door. "Go join your soldiers." The crimson-armored Elites bowed their heads and departed from the command center, leaving Yarna to his work. Glancing over the table, he looked for the Spec Ops teams; only Godly and Humble Units were still completely together. He quickly assigned them the first two tower sectors and moved on, reuniting and assigning each team as he found them.

"Warrior 'Zakamee," Yarna called over the radio as he located Blessed Unit, "this is Field Commander 'Orgalmee; respond."

"This is 'Zakamee. Go ahead, Excellency."

"I'm splitting your platoon," the Field Commander instructed, glancing over the map to find the rest of 'Zakamee's unit. "I'm redirecting most of them to our defense lines and up into the towers to fight the Brutes; you may take a pair of Hunters, four Elites, and a full clutch of Grunts to rendezvous with the rest of your squad. They are currently pinned down at intersection 7-Godly-15. Afterwards, contact me for your assignment."

"Affirmative, Excellency." So Blessed Unit would take tower twelve; that left Chaste Unit to take the thirteenth and Pious Unit to take the fourteenth and final tower. He glanced out the window at the battle and was surprised: nothing moved in the streets.

"Damn," he swore, pulling out his sword and activating it. He ran from the building and out into the road, glancing around. He couldn't see the Hunters, Grunts, or Elites that had been here only a moment before. In a window, however, he thought he saw movement. He took a step forward and inclined his head to get a better view, and as he did that two thin purple beams crossed right where his head had been, each barely missing his neck. Surprised, the Field Commander began running towards the buildings for cover; as he leaped through a window, however, he realized his mistake.

Now surrounding him were five Brutes, each growling menacingly. Scattered about were bodies, some of the soldiers that had previously been guarding the command post. It clicked in the Sangheili warrior's mind: sniper fire had probably killed the Hunters and forced the rest of them inside where Brutes were waiting. In such close quarters his troops had been slaughtered.

Underestimating your enemy is the quickest way to death.

Damn.

The Brutes brought up their plasma rifles and began firing. Yarna's shield absorbed a few shots while he decided his course of action: dropping low, he quickly stepped behind a counter. Drawing his own rifle he popped up and held down the trigger, blue plasma pouring from the generators. One of the Jiralhanae took the full brunt of the attack to his face and collapsed in a heap. Yarna leaped over the counter, seized the fallen Brute's plasma rifle and fired with both weapons. Another of the monsters was cut down, but the two weapons in the Sangheili's hand protested their use by way of overheating. He quickly dropped them and pulled out his sword once again, plasma splashing on his shield as he crossed the short distance between himself and his three remaining enemies. The sword made a wide arc as he cut through the stomach of one Brute and severed the arm of another. The latter clutched his stump and screamed, but the former ignored the intestines spilling out of him and rushed for the Elite's throat; the Field Commander was quicker, however, and twirled to slice wide again, decapitating the encroaching beast and ending his attack by burying the twin prongs of energy in the one-armed Brute's face.

His attack was too wide, and the final Brute took advantage of it. He threw himself at the gold-armored warrior, the sword slipping from his fingers and the two grappling on the floor. Both creatures strained with all their muscles, rolling about and knocking things over. Yarna became dimly aware that his radio was demanding

attention, but he couldn't reach for it; instead he continued to fight against the Brute.

Here is the technique Orin taught me, he thought to himself, and then let the Jiralhanae roll on top of him. Freeing one of his hands from the grapple, he swiped up and gouged out his attacker's eyes, then used the sockets as leverage. After achieving a good hold he flicked his wrist and the Brute's neck snapped like a twig. Unfortunately the dead weight of its body fell right on him and it took significant effort to move it. Finally freeing himself, the Field Commander stood up and wiped futilely at the black blood staining his armor. His radio was clamoring for attention.

Thank you, old friend. He picked up his radio. "Go ahead."

'Zakamee was on the other end of the line. "What are your orders?"

Before Yarna could reply, plasma fire poured in through one of the windows. The Elite dropped his radio and ducked, scrambling to find the Brutes' dropped weapons. He picked up two plasma rifles and immediately returned fire against the building across the street. The firefight was shorter than before as Yarna properly sighted his targets, melting faces with each burst and avoiding overheating by moderating his fire. Unfortunately, one Brute was only wounded, and might have access to a radio. Swearing the Field Commander picked up his radio and dashed out into the street towards the other building, weaving between sniper fire.

"Say again, Warrior," Yarna demanded.

"We need orders!"

"Secure tower twelve," the Field Master said. "Send the infantry to rendezvous with Commander 'Vadumee, they'll be needed on a mission to the surface of the ring." He reached the entrance to the other building and kicked down the door, the material cracking loudly under his boot. There was the Brute, dead from his wounds but with a radio in his hands. He might have had time to call in artillery. "I must leave. While in the towers, keep an eye out for Brutes!" Before he could finish his sentence there was a thunderous roar next to his head. He fell to the ground, bits and pieces of his radio landing around him; he was too dazed to do more than just crawl further into the house.

There were more nearby explosions, but they were off-target; the Sangheili warrior rolled onto his back and stared out into the street. A small detachment of Brutes were firing into the building with primitive grenade launchers, weapons that the rest of the Covenant had referred to as "Brute Shots."

"Damn," he muttered, and struggled to reach some kind of cover as the beasts fired more rounds into the building. He was outnumbered and outgunned, but not outmaneuvered as he picked himself up and limped into the corridors. As far as he could tell, this building was some kind of office. The Brutes outside shouted something, most likely orders for infiltrating and neutralizing the Elite. Yarna began throwing things around, constructing crude barricades and traps for his enemies. Crouching behind a desk, he pulled out his plasma sword

hilt and a grenade.

_Once on Pearl I was in this situation, _he reminisced as he listened to the approaching thumps and crashes, _but OrinÃ© came to save me. I guess I can't count on you anymore, my friend. This is goodbye, and hopefully I won't greet you in the Great Journey for a while longer._

Just outside the room the Brutes smashed a piece of furniture, and Yarna took it as the sign to prime the grenade. Blue light began fizzing out of it and quickly he hurled it from his hand, not wishing for it to bond to him instead of his target. As it sailed through the air, three Brutes came charging in; it adhered to one's helmet but the creature tossed the armor off before it exploded. The blast left them dazed long enough, however, for the Field Master to move in. He quickly slashed the closest Jiralhanae's arms off and snapped up its Brute Shot, firing the weapon from his hip. The kickback was intense but the Elite did his best to compensate; unfortunately his first two shots went wild, ricocheted off the walls and fragmenting several decorative potteries. The air filled with smoke as Yarna fired off another two grenades, these ones more on target. One struck the furthest Brute in the gut and the second in its face, knocking the beast down and out, but technically not dead yet. He shifted his aim and pulled the trigger, but only empty clicking met his ears; he had exhausted what was left inside the clip. The final Brute, seeing its opportunity, lunged forward with the blade beneath the Brute Shot, hoping to mortally wound its opponent. Yarna raised his own weapon's blade and countered, knocking the incoming steel to the side. He struck forward but was himself parried; instead of working against the weight, however, he swung with it, turning around in a full circle and bringing the bayonet right up against the Brute's neck. All he could do was grin maliciously before decapitating his opponent.

Shouting echoed from down the hallway and his head snapped up. He had held these Brutes off but he was quickly growing exhausted. Escape was his best option now. Glancing around he saw a small gravity lift going up; taking it would lead him to higher ground and perhaps an access point to a less Jiralhanae-infested structure. The gold-armored warrior leaped into the purple shaft of light and floated upwards, breaking into a sprint just as his hooves touched the ground. As he had suspected the Brutes hadn't bothered with securing other levels to the building, content with holding street-level. A couple levels higher and Yarna found an access bridge linking this building with one across the street.

Immediately after crossing, a plasma blade appeared out of nowhere and settled next to his neck. "Don't move," a voice hissed in his ear, "or I will present your head as a trophy to my future mate." The deepness and warbling quality immediately suggested Sangheili.

"I am Field Master 'Orgalmee," Yarna growled. "The Jiralhanae attacked me. Put down your weapon."

The blade shifted away from his throat. A blue-armored Elite stepped out of the shadows bowed low. "Forgive me, Excellency," he muttered, "I know not my place. I feared you were an agent of the Brutes."

"What are you doing here? Why are you not fighting, warrior?" The

gold-armored Elite was willing to ignore the breach of conduct, as well as the fact that the Minor was wielding a weapon inappropriate for his station, given the circumstances.

The Elite Minor looked fresh out of Institution: unmarred armor, smooth face, wide eyes. He glanced out the window at the Brutes in the street. Four were riding a recently captured Spectre, sweeping the plasma turret through the bottom-floor windows and firing at anything suspicious. "We are waiting for them to grow complacent; once they let their guard down we will be able to strike from behind."

"We?"

Nodding, the blue-armored soldier barked an order into an adjacent room. Two other Elite Minors, a handful of Grunts of varying ranks and specialties, and a single Hunter emerged from hiding. "We are the only survivors after a Brute attack on our barracks. My entire unit was eliminated, as was theirs. I took command and led them here, to hide and wait for those _bastards _to drop their guards."

Yarna was taken aback. The barracks were a good distance away; for this group of soldiers to have moved through it, secured this floor, and hide themselves was quite a feat. In addition, the Hunter's Bond Brother was nowhere in sight: it should have been berserking by now or so overcome with grief as to not be able to function.

"Impressive, young one," the Field Master commented, turning his attention back to the defacto leader. "I'm afraid I must counteract your plans and order you to begin moving for the dropship bays, but nonetheless you have accomplished quite a feat. What is your name?"

The scrawny Sangheili brought himself up to full height (a good deal shorter than that of Yarna) and puffed out his chest. "I am Maka 'Fulsamee," he said proudly, "the youngest of my Lineage."

â€"â€"

"_Excellency, the gravity lifts into the tower are shut down."_

"Damn! Are you sure you can't get them working again?"

"_Not quickly enough. We need to take out that artillery before it can strike our retreating forces."_

Balask 'Zakamee nodded. "Very well, Kasa. Return here; we will have to scale the towers under our own power." The Junior Officer sent an affirmative, and the Senior Officer pondered how to manage his next move. He, Sesep, and Nunot were crouched behind a row of supply crates close to the base of the tower. They had successfully sneaked into the Brute and Jackal fortifications and slaughtered them all; now they had to find a way up.

The Senior Officer looked up the sheer face of the towers, hardly acknowledging Kasa and Opom's return as they disengaged their active camouflage, and considered their options. With the gravity lifts

offline, there was truly only one way up.

"Warriors, prepare your rappels," he said quietly, and all the Special Operations soldiers reached into storage units on their armor and withdrew what looked like scaled-down Needlers. Engaging their camouflage they moved from behind the crates and right up to the wall formed by the massive structure they needed to climb.

Operating with cloaking technology took specialized training: while it offered the advantage of one's opponent not being able to see him, it also meant that a soldier using it could not see himself or his teammates. All movement had to be meticulously pre-planned and memorized, and all equipment had to be placed in exactly the same spot. Elites in the infantry had such technology in their standard-issue armor, but it would turn off personal shields in order to power the cloaking cells, and vice-versa; Special Operations Elites could have both a shield and active camouflage active.

Aiming using their training and the slight distortion that represented their arms as their guides, the five warriors fired their piton guns in near-perfect unison. The small spikes latched into position ten feet above a walkway and began generating a gravity stream back to each individual origin. By then the Special Operations soldiers had attached their weapons to magnetic hold-points on their armor and allowed the pull to lift them up silently. Once they got near the gravity beam dissipated and they dropped to the walkway. The Brutes stationed there didn't shift at all but the Jackals cocked their heads; their sensitive ears had picked up the sounds of feet landing on the metal floor. As the Grunts silently moved into concealed locations and prepared their own assault, Kasa and Balask raised their Carbines and fired. Thin green streaks seemed to materialize out of nowhere and pierced the avian creatures' skulls before they had a chance to react. Crying out in surprise the Brutes fanned out and began sniffing at the air in an effort to find the two Sangheili who had just eliminated their flock of Kig-Yar. However the Grunts in the shadows ignited two plasma grenades each and threw them onto the pelts of the traitors. The resulting explosions, though considerably more audible than Special Operations generally permitted, were effective in eliminating all the enemies present.

Without missing a beat Kasa tossed aside his Carbine and withdrew his Beam Rifle, throwing himself on the edge of the walkway and aiming down the sights. They were in a good position to watch over the Jiralhanae artillery team and with the sights of the rifle pushed to their maximum the now-invisible soldier could watch the artillery battery cycle before it fired again.

_Not another shot, _he promised, settled the crosshairs on a Brute captain's skull, and fired. The purple beam streaked down and pierced through the back of the creature's head, splattering bits of bone and brain everywhere. As the body slumped to the ground, two Jackal snipers that had been posted whirled around with their rifles aimed and looked for him; but even with their superior eyes, at this distance not even they could see the faint distortions caused by the active camouflage. It was quickly becoming a waiting game, and one Jackal turned around to talk with a Brute lieutenant who had jumped behind a crate. The instant its eyes left his area Kasa readjusted his aim and fired again, this time bringing down its partner; the avian creature flopped lifelessly to the deck as the other Jackal

turned, but Kasa was quick. Soon both of the Kig-Yar snipers were disposed of.

However, aside from the unfortunate Brute lieutenant who already had his head up, the young warrior couldn't claim any more targets; all the remaining Brutes had taken cover behind barriers and storage crates.

"Now is the time," he whispered, and at that signal Balask and the three Grunts once again readied their piton guns and fired, this time letting the spikes dig into the floor a few feet away from where the Brutes were hiding. Kasa stayed behind, watching their distortions be lifted up and gently carried over. He had to remain behind and cover them from afar.

Balask 'Zakamee, upon touching down on the floor, immediately moved forward while the Grunts took up defensive positions. Three Brutes, the Elite counted, had survived Kasa's initial assault and were cowering behind cover. He crept to the back where none of the Brutes were looking and withdrew his plasma sword, the weapon flashing to life in his hand. Because it contained so much energy that the active camouflage generators in his armor couldn't cloak it, the blade alone appeared in plain view. The nearest Jiralhanae soldier, startled by the sound, looked back and received two prongs of death to his face. The other two jumped up and began firing at where they believed him to be but the Senior Officer saw a slight blue glow behind them. They never knew what hit them as the plasma grenades exploded, tearing the two beasts apart.

After checking the platform, the team turned off their active camouflage and strode over to the artillery gun. It was still waiting to be fired again. He removed a special charge from his belt and fitted it to the control panel, stepping back out of the blast range. It quickly flared blue and melted the terminal, rendering the weapon inoperable.

"Mission accomplished," he muttered, waving at Kasa. He keyed his radio to the Junior Officer's frequency. "Remain there and keep an eye out for trouble. We will secure the rest of this tower fromâ€" The Elite was cut off as a flash of silver erupted in the sky off in the distance. Blessed Unit as a whole watched as the Slipspace rift spat a human vessel out into the vast inner chamber of High Charity.

_Impossible! _Balask thought, his mouth hanging open in shock. _Human technology is not so advanced as to navigate the eleventh dimension so precisely! _Regardless the small human frigate began weaving through the towers and coming towards them. The Senior Officer quickly bellowed a warning and everyone dived to the ground as the ship, apparently heavily damaged from some battle, narrowly missed their tower. They watched in horror as it impacted the next one down the line, a massive fireball of blue and orange erupting and a wave of heat washing over the team. The fire quickly died down and the human craft jutted out of the smoldering hole, remaining in place.

They stared at it a while longer in silent awe. "Kasa," Balask finally managed, "what do you see?"

The younger Sangheili adjusted his aim to look at the crash site

adjacent to them. "It's that ship that followed Regret's fleet here, Excellency," he commented, sweeping the crosshairs back and forth. "I do not believe any human could survive such a horrendous crash—wait..." Peculiar shapes were moving over the top of the ship, ones that moved with a strange loping stride. "Those aren't humans! They're Flood! The Parasite is here!"

—"

Yarna could hardly believe it. He had just finished saying goodbye to his closest friend when said friend's younger brother entered his life. The 'Fulsam Lineage continued? The Field Master knew that Orin— had an older brother but had never met him; he also had a sister that he never heard much about. But a younger brother? _A strange turn of events that the Forerunner have revealed, _he mused.

He perched himself on the edge of the building, looking down into the streets below. It was a three-story drop, one they weren't likely to survive. Glancing back at the group of soldiers behind him, he was starting to realize that they weren't likely to survive anyway. As competent as Maka appeared to be, his companions seemed to be slightly below the bar of warriors: the two Minors were siblings and bickered almost constantly, the Grunts were about as cowardly as they came, and the lone Hunter never said or really did anything. He followed Yarna's orders to come up to the roof but displayed no personal initiative.

_Perhaps I have set myself up to fail. _Slowly the realization came to him that he was not concerned at all about these soldiers under his command, as he would not have associated himself with them under different circumstances, but instead it was to the young 'Fulsamee. _I failed you, Orin—, when I accepted the position of Honor Guard. I failed you because I could not be with you and Rurut when your death came. Perhaps I will save myself by keeping your brother alive._

Below them the Brutes were shouting in the streets, directing a convoy of vehicles towards the weakening Elite lines. Their fur was shaggy and burnt in a few places, indicating that they had recently seen combat: their Captain was nursing a facial wound that wept blood down his face and stained his bandolier. Yarna noted with distaste that it carried a Brute Shot and knew that, as high up as they were, the grenade it fired would be devastating.

"Do you have plasma grenades?" the Field Commander asked over his shoulder. Maka and the two other Elite Minors withdrew satchels while the Grunts produced one or two apiece; the Hunter merely shook its head. "Come to the edge but remain silent! Prepare to throw on my command." They took up position and Yarna waved to the Hunter, instructing him to move to the edge as well and wait until after the grenades detonated before firing his Fuel Rod Cannon into the enemy.

After a moment, he bellowed his order to throw the grenades and the troops let fly hissing, burning devices of death. For a moment the Brutes thought it was raining fire until the raindrops adhered to their skin, burning and detonating. Fourteen Brutes, including their Captain, died in the initial bombardment; amidst the confusion, some of the Spectre pilots regained their senses enough to move and allow

their gunners a clear shot of their attackers. The Hunter, seeing that the grenades detonated, raised his cannon and began firing.

Yarna watched in amazement as the armored behemoth fired his weapon with surgical precision, turning what had been regarded as a crude and explosive weapon into an oversized and overpowered sniper's weapon. The green radioactive waves poured from the barrel and struck the vehicles where it would do the most damage, often in the fusion cores or anti-gravity pods that kept them aloft. In a matter of minutes, an entire column composed of Ghosts, Spectres, Shadows, and Wraiths was reduced to rubble and brought to the mercy of the soldiers on the rooftop.

The chaos was glorious, and for a moment the golden-armored Sangheili warrior allowed himself to enjoy it. Their enemy was below them, in pieces and disadvantaged, ripe for being finished off. Under different circumstances he would have ordered his squad to move into the streets and finish off the survivors, but such action would not do: his job was to get as many loyal Covenant clients into space to regroup.

Suddenly there was a bright flash overhead and a loud bang; the squad instinctively ducked down, a shockwave rolling over them. Above them the human ship tore a hole through Slipspace and entered High Charity, soaring past and gradually out of sight. After the rumbling receded the group looked up, absolutely stunned. That the humans could have recovered enough to assault the greatest fortress known to the Covenant... A tremor eventually ran through the city, signaling the end of the frigate.

"Come, we're moving on," he ordered, and turned to start over an access bridge that led to another group of rooftops; a two-thumbed hand gripped his shoulder in an attempt to stop him. Furious, the Field Commander turned around.

"Why?!" Maka demanded, releasing Yarna's shoulder. "We are winning! Why do we not press the advantage? Are you aâ€"?" The sentence never reached completion as Yarna backhanded the Elite Minor as hard as he could, sending the youngster sprawling onto the ground. With a growl he reached down and seized the young 'Fulsamee by the armor and pulled him up, staring into his eyes; a bruise was forming and a small cut just beneath his cheek leaked a small trail of blood.

"You will listen to your commanding officer!" the Field Commander shouted, enraged at the soldier's insolence. Little brother of his lifelong friend or not, it was obvious that the young Sangheili did not know proper combat discipline. "You will not ask questions! You will _obey _my orders!" He threw the Elite to the ground again, barely restraining himself from kicking the prone form before him. "Do you understand?"

Maka coughed and nodded, too shocked to speak. He pulled himself to his feet, rubbing tenderly at the bruises. Yarna grunted and turned, continuing on the path he had already plotted out, the troops following wordlessly. They moved above the streets while they could and then through them once the access bridges stopped existing. Occasionally they met some resistance, and they plowed over the minor skirmishes and ran through the bigger ones. Three Grunts lost their lives in the process, leaving only four; the Elite Minors, though

young, were able to keep up quite well; the Hunter just thundered silently along, firing when ordered to but otherwise not doing anything. Yarna fell to the rear, making sure that they all kept on the path towards the dropship hangars.

The closer they came to their destination the heavier the fighting became. The Field Commander noted with satisfaction the lack of artillery barrages that had previously been chewing up Elite lines. He had hoped that perhaps they could have turned the artillery machines against the Brutes, but the Special Operations teams had clearly done a number on the hardware.

Finally the Sangheili lines were visible, a combination of Grunts, Elites, and Hunters holding back the hordes of Brutes, Drones, and Jackals. Plasma flashed across the street, each lashing out for the opposing side, the lane between declared no-man's land. The haggard squad tossed the last of their grenades to open a path and then rushed through, reaching the relative safety of their cheering allies.

"Excellency!" A Special Operations Elite ran up, one whom Yarna identified as belonging to Humble Unit. "It is good that you have returned; Councilor 'Hayatasha has been waiting to contact you." The soldier held out a radio, and the Field Master snatched it quickly.

"Councilor," Yarna growled, "Is this important? I'm quite busy."

"Yes, it's important! Why do you think I've been trying to contact you for the last hour?!" The rage was evident in his voice. "The Prophets have begun massacring the Councilors! I know not the fate of the High Council as they were sent to the ring, but I can only assume the Jiralhanae plan to betray them as well if they haven't already.

"But there's another problem. We've confirmed the presence of a Demon in High Charity. Myself and two of my guards are going to try and kill it in the confusion and hopefully tip the scales in our favor."

"This is fascinating, Councilor," the golden-armored Sangheili said, "but so far this doesn't apply to me."

"I'm giving you an order, 'Orgalmee," 'Hayatasha replied, "You are to take troops down to the ring and save as many councilors as you can! That is all; go!" The transmission cut out, and Yarna was left staring in shock at the radio unit in his hand. Up until this point, he hadn't realized just how desperate things had become. Somehow he had thought everything could go back to normal. Now, he knew it for sure. Orders were orders, and he would pay heed to the words.

"Warrior," he said, handing the radio back to the black-clad Special Operations soldier, "find the rest of your unit and bring them to me. After we link up with the Drowned in Honor in space we will be dropping onto Halo and attempt to rescue and relieve our forces trapped down there."

As the warrior ran off to pass on the orders, Yarna looked up at the

massive dome overhead. For eons, High Charity had been the holy city of the Covenant, a place of peace and festivity for all those who followed the Forerunners. Now weapons fire replaced the sound of pipes, artillery the tolling of bells, screams of Banshees the heavenly choirs of the temples. In hours, the centuries of progress and perserverance of the Holy Covenant had been undone. The Sangheili were truly cast out.

With a derisive snort he turned and prepared to give the orders to abandon High Charity. _Good riddance._

12. Lost

Chapter 12: Lost

As the fleet of Phantoms cleared High Charity, it was apparent to Field Commander Yarna 'Orgalmee that his thoughts regarding the Jiralhanae space-craft were on the right track, though not totally accurate. The Sangheili ships were slowly gaining the advantage, but still were fighting a tough battle. Plasma torpedoes flared and fired at the Brute ships that were hastily trying to form a dual-purpose perimeter around the holy city: forward cannons to fire on the Elites and pulse lasers to fire on fleeing hostile dropships. The Prophet of Truth had ordered the maneuver: it was his favorite defensive sphere tactic.

However, one thing the Prophet failed to consider was the lack of religious ideology the Sangheili would suffer from when fighting against those who betrayed them. Ordinarily not a single weapon would be fired towards Halo or High Charity, but now the Elites were unleashing volley after volley of plasma waves usually reserved for the glassing of planets. It was a thrill for the golden-armored Elite to watch the massive rolling destruction of sapphire energy tear through the Brute ranks.

It took some careful piloting, but the dropships were able to clear the still-assembling ships without losses and spread out to the Elite ships. Yarna commanded his pilot towards the _Drowned in Honor_, and quickly informed Humble Unit in the rear of their impending arrival.

The _Honor _was a carrier, and unlike most of its sister ships in the fleet it had been built with only one thing in mind: war. Most of the carriers belonging to the Covenant had temple areas, meditation gardens, and recreational distractions; the _Honor _had cleared out all these things to make room for extra troops, larger armories and vehicle depositories, and, important to Yarna's mission, more drop-pod launchers than the average ship. Such resources would serve them well once they reached the ring.

Upon their landing, Yarna hurried out of the landing bay to the bridge, noting with some disdain that the corridors he traveled through showed signs of having seen combat. _It appears that there were subverters on this ship. _The thought didn't shake him at all; he had been listening to reports of Elites turning on Elites while he was in the command center on High Charity, and quickly forced himself to grow cold towards the thought of fighting his brothers. What did concern him was that there was damage indicative of fighting all the way to the bridge. He found the doors locked and used his

not-yet-deleted Honor Guard clearance to gain emergency access.

As soon as he entered, however, another golden-clad Elite whirled around, bringing up two blood-soaked Needlers. The Field Master immediately recognized Ship Master Gersha 'Kaeromee, a fellow veteran of the first Halo; it took a moment and a defensive gesture from the intruding Sangheili for the Ship Master to reciprocate the identification. Guardedly he lowered his weapons.

"Apologies, Field Commander," Gersha said out of formality; he never regretted drawing on anybody for any reason. "It is difficult to tell who one's allies are now."

Yarna nodded his assent. "Indeed it is, Ship Master, but I have an urgent mission for you from the Council." His counterpart perked up, obviously interested in being assigned an honest task: it seemed he had fought his brethren too much for one day. "I will be taking contingents of soldiers down to the sacred ring to relieve our forces and try to rescue the Councilors; I need the Honor to do a fly-by and disgorge my troops."

Ship Master 'Kareromee considered it, turning his attention to the tactical displays on the bridge. "There are many Brute ships between us and the ring," he mused aloud, "but given our firepower, I'd say it would be no trial." He paused. "The Prophet of Truth's flagship, however, might pose a problem."

Yarna looked over the other Sangheili's shoulder at the screen in question. There, holding station near the control room, was the Purity of Spirit. Truth had armed her well for a medium-tonnage cruiser and its shields were nigh-impervious; it had been built for luxury and show, however, and had little offensive capabilities. Still, its pulse lasers could potentially take out drop-pods before they reached the surface.

The Field Commander weighed the risks involved and came to a quick decision. "We can still drop in," he decided. "Is there anything you can do to lessen the Spirit's anti-aircraft fire?"

Gersha nodded. "I will divert a flight of Seraphs to harass the cruiser, perhaps even draw off some of its Banshee support. After you touch down, however, I must caution you that reinforcements may be long in coming." Yarna understood perfectly: he had grown used to the possibility of being totally cut off, and the tactics involved had grown on him quickly.

After confirming the plans with the Ship Master, Yarna departed the bridge and headed towards the closest armory. Humble Unit was there, choosing the equipment they wished to bring to Halo. Carbines and beam rifles were the weapons of choice, abandoning grenades for the sake of extra clips. They were being sent in to rescue the High Council, after all, and it would do no good to use inaccurate weapons when such high-priority hostages needed to be saved.

"Warriors, your ears!" Yarna demanded, and the black-armored Special Operations soldiers immediately ceased their activity and turned their full and undivided attention to their defacto commander. "We will be dropping directly onto the ring at the site of the betrayers' greatest activity. Infantry forces will most likely be either assaulting the Brutes or retreating from battle. As much as our

hearts may call out to them, as honorable as it would be to help them, we must focus our efforts on locating and rescuing the Councilors. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Excellency!" The unit responded as one, saluted, and finished preparing their gear. One thing that Yarna had always admired about special warfare groups: they understood the importance of pragmatism over honor. Together the group of Sangheili marched towards the drop-pod launch bay, but halfway through Yarna spotted a recognizable figure. Maka 'Fulsamee stood off to the side waiting for the Field Master to pass, at which point he fell into step beside the older Elite. The desire to put the young soldier in his place again passed through Yarna, but he temporarily dismissed it.

"Excellency," the cobalt-armored Sangheili began, "I wish to join you in battle on Halo."

Sighing heavily, Yarna stopped himself and his follower but signaled for Humble Unit to continue on. Once they were out of earshot, the Field Master laid a comforting hand on the young man's shoulder. "Maka, I know things are difficult for your family," he began, "I fought beside OrinÃ© for years and I knew no better warrior or friend. I am sad that he is dead, and truly it grieves me, but looking for death on the battlefield will not make it better."

At first a fire flashed in Maka's eyes, one that silently accused the older Sangheili of heresy and caused him to withdraw his hand, but it quickly subsided. He instead lowered his head. "My family has been the victim of much dishonor, and I wish to earn it back. My oldest brother vanished years ago, my sister was executed for heresy, and her twin brother has been left dead on the humans' home planet." A new pair of eyes looked at Yarna, ones that knew the true meaning of pain and loss. "My mother does not yet know of OrinÃ©'s fate, and I do not know that of my father for he was still fighting at Earth when Regret fled the planet." The self-pity hardened into resolve, a familiar look that the Field Master had only seen on one other Sangheili once before. "I will fight for my family's honor and I will regain it, come what may, be it death or salvation. I swear it."

These words caught the older Elite by surprise. They were familiar words, spoken by OrinÃ© upon learning of his twin sister's disgrace, when Yarna and Enma 'Gubotee had comforted him in the armory. He had lived up to the promise: he overcame the Three Trials to earn his parents' right to bear another child, the result of such permission now standing before him. Deep inside his soul something stirred, a pride of Lineage, but this was not his own: it was pride in the 'Fulsam Lineage. It was clear that OrinÃ© was guiding the boy from Beyond, placing his little brother on the right path towards the Great Journey.

Moved by the unseen presence of his brother-in-arms, Yarna stood straighter and nodded. "Very well, young one," he said, "Board a dropship bound for the surface of Halo and take up arms with your brothers against the Prophets. Make a push towards the control room and stop any Brutes that stand in your way: such vile creatures must not be permitted to undertake the Great Journey." Maka nodded, saluted, and hurried off down the corridor to rally his fellows. The Field Commander couldn't help but smile at his enthusiasm and feel empowered by the thought that his good friend would watch over them

all.

For the time being, though, Humble Unit needed him. His arrival at the drop-pod launch bay was heralded by a chorus of salutes, but Yarna quickly waved them off and eased himself into a pod. The gel molded around him, fitting like a second skin, and an automated system as opposed to live technicians fitted the front lid on the pod. It was pitch-black for a moment but then the gel itself lit up, bathing Yarna in a soft white glow. It was almost hypnotic and for a moment he just wanted to sleep; however, the hologram in front of him lit up and displayed the countdown timer for the next launch and the Field Commander immediately refocused.

"Humble Unit," he spoke into the inter-pod radio, "You will be dropping with me close to the Purity of Spirit. There is a large risk that any one of you will be shot down by anti-aircraft fire, but remember: those who die in battle die with the greatest honor." He purposefully excluded the possibility of him himself getting shot down; the warriors needed to know his confidence and needed to be confident in him.

The affirmative to his statement came quickly, and shortly thereafter the pods were fired down their tubes and out into space as the Drowned in Honor passed over the ring. The eleven capsules containing the ten Sangheili from Humble and the Field Commander plunged through the void, reaching the atmosphere of Halo rapidly and without incident. As their exteriors began to heat up from the friction, they began to realign themselves on-target. The data screen inside his pod told Yarna that Ship Master 'Kaeromee had kept his promise and ordered a flight of Seraphs to harass the ship, distracting many of its pulse laser batteries; unfortunately, one spotted the incoming pods and fired. One of the pods, located in the middle of the rear of the formation, took the full blast. It heated up and exploded like an oversized grenade, the force of the explosion scattering the ten remaining pods. They quickly tried to readjust but many were too far off course.

Yarna cursed, knowing that now they had to add "regrouping" to their list of objectives. His pod was still somewhat on course, but he noted that he would be landing in a different clearing than where he wanted, dangerously close to a cliff.

His landing was right on target and his pod crashed into the ground as planned, three of the others landing in the same general area. The doors began to hiss open, but the impatient Elites inside drew back their legs and kicked out with their armored hooves, sending the metal coverings flying forward. Instantly Yarna's energy sword was out and ready for combat, but as he looked around he saw only dead Brutes. Someone had already beaten these beasts.

"Bah," he called out to the other soldiers, "over so soon?" They nodded, informing him that there were no targets in the vicinity. The Field Commander began jogging up a nearby incline, signaling for the three soldiers to follow, and quickly looked out over the cliff. There, within sight, was the holy control room, where the Icon was to be dedicated and the Great Journey was to begin. He felt his knees grow weak at the sight, but forced his legs to keep moving, content with mentally repeating his scripture.

As he reached the top of the incline, however, the lines of the

Sacred Oath died in his head: there, standing in front of a door leading further into the valley and holding two blood-soaked plasma rifles, was the Arbiter. Yarna slowed his pace, the three Special Operations Elites catching up during his pause.

_I believed you to be dead, _the golden-armored Elite said in his mind, but did not say it out loud. It would have sounded far too disappointed, too contradictory to the spirit of combat. He was fully conscious of the Elites right over his shoulders and that the Arbiter did not recognize him in his new armor. With that revelation, he knew it was time to swallow his pride.

"Come, Arbiter!" he shouted enthusiastically, "There are more Brutes to kill!" He rushed past the ornately-armored hero and into the room beyond, and then waited for the soldiers to catch up. Together, and assisted by the Arbiter, they ventured forward into the structure. They faced wave after wave of Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar, striking them down with plasma fire and energy blades; strangely, as time passed on, Yarna found fighting beside the Arbiter to be... enjoyable. It was not that he held any more respect for the Arbiter now, but rather that fighting side-by-side commanded a certain degree of tolerance and could even foster camaraderie over time.

After liberating a clutch of Grunts from an underground cavern the warriors entered a small foyer-like room. They were on the top "step" overlooking Brutes below, one of which was settled into a turret in the middle of the room. Three Grunts were silently ordered to the sides by the Arbiter while Yarna gave the hand signal for Humble Unit to activate its active camouflage and sneak towards the Jiralhanae positions. He considered activating his own cloaking field but realized his shields would be down, and changed his mind to waiting behind a nearby column; the Arbiter took up a similar position on the opposite side of the balcony.

Once he was certain Humble was in position, the Field Commander gave a signal and he and the Arbiter primed and threw plasma grenades. The twin spheres of sapphire death arced majestically through the air and adhered to the turret. The explosion was magnificent, killing the Brute on the turret and two more nearby. Immediately following it, weapons fire seemed to appear from nowhere and cut through the Jiralhanae ranks.

As Humble relaxed the Arbiter waved the Grunts forward; however, the doors on the far side of the room parted and two Brutes rushed in to investigate the commotion. They saw the damage and the Grunts, immediately growling and raising their weapons; however, two plasma swords ignited and impaled each beast, extinguishing their lives. The bodies hit the ground with a heavy thump, and the diminutive Unggoy breathed a sigh of relief. Humble Unit decloaked, declining to gloat but with satisfied grins on their faces.

The troops began policing weapons and ammunition from the dead, and while they did this the Arbiter approached Yarna. "I recognize you now," he said. "You are the Honor Guard with whom I sparred on High Charity."

Yarna cringed, resigning his anonymity. "Sparring is far too kind of a term, but yes."

No more was said, and quickly they moved on. If the small exchange

affected the Arbiter at all he did not show it, something that relieved the golden-armored Sangheili to a certain extent. He had his mission to accomplish and though he would never care to admit it, the ceremonially-armored warrior would make it much easier. And indeed he did, for while he had been denounced as a heretic, he had earned his previous rank as Supreme Commander because of his merit in combat.

The group quickly found themselves in front of a large stone door leading outside. All three Grunts were dead and one of the Elites, but now one of them was armed with a Fuel Rod Gun they had found in another hallway. Yarna was troubled: they had seen no sign of the Councilors but they found plenty of slaughtered Sangheili troops.

An unexpected hand settled itself on his shoulder. Surprised, the Field Commander turned to see the Arbiter looking at him with concern. "Do not be distracted," he said, "We will find the Councilors soon." Yarna merely stared, his mouth agape. Despite the horrible things he had said, the Arbiter was still treating him as if he were a friend. Perhaps he was more like his grandfather than he realized.

Nodding, the golden-armored Sangheili turned to his troops. "Warriors, forward!" he ordered. As the doors parted, they were greeted by two Jiralhanae and three Kig-Yar who immediately opened fire. Plasma lanced out towards them, splashing off their personal shields. The Arbiter and one of the Elites dodged to one side while Yarna and the other Elite charged straight up the middle, heading right for the Brutes. As they neared, each abandoned their plasma rifles and withdrew their swords, slashing out. The Brutes, in response, raised their own rifles in defense but the devices were quickly cleaved in two. Before they could use their massive arms to grab the Elites the sword-wielding warriors quickly deprived them of their limbs, followed by neat decapitations.

"You fight well, warrior," Yarna said to the black-armored Sangheili, observing the carnage they had caused together.

"As do you, Excellency," the other conceded.

Their messy chore completed, the pair glanced back at the Arbiter. He and the other warrior were finishing off the Jackals, firing at them from behind cover. _Well, _Yarna thought with a satisfied smirk, _he is certainly more cautious than Grandfather was said to be._

Once all their enemies were fallen, the four Sangheili began to make their way down into the valley. Quickly, however, Brute reinforcements arrived, the Captain riding on a Ghost. They hefted Brute Shots and, much to the surprise of the Elites, shotguns.

"They use human weapons!" one of the Special Operations warriors yelled. "Kill the Heretics!" One of the Brutes in question growled and ran forward, raising the shotgun and firing. The Elite's shields overloaded and the buckshot tore into his chest, knocking him over into the sand. He clutched weakly for his fallen plasma rifle for a few moments before darkness finally took him and he lay still. The Brute grinned maliciously just before plasma fire from three rifles cut him struck him in the face and cut him down where he stood.

The Brutes further down began firing and charging, the Captain

heading the rush forward on his Ghost. Yarna and the surviving warrior quickly threw themselves behind cover and began firing at the oncoming hostiles from relative safety, but the Arbiter didn't move. The Captain at the controls of the Ghost laughed and drove straight at him, content with the idea of running over the Sangheili hero. The ceremonially-armored Sangheili didn't flinch, holding his ground until just before the craft was about to strike him. With a well timed jump he landed on the wing of the vehicle, sneering at the surprised Brute and forcefully kicking him out of the seat. He landed with a thud and rolled a couple of feet, groaning and managing to sit up before the surviving Spec Ops Elite put two Carbine rounds through the front of his skull.

With their Captain gone and the Arbiter on the Ghost, the remaining Jiralhanae attackers fell easily. A lone Kig-Yar sniper ran around the corner, but he was quickly mowed down by fire from the Ghost's twin cannons. The group moved forward but the Arbiter raced ahead down the ravine.

"I shall scout and assault the enemy forces up ahead," he radioed back to Yarna. "Catch up with me when you can!"

"Affirmative, Arbiter," the Field Commander replied. "Strike down these beasts and guide us forward!" To his surprise, he realized that his blessing was sincere. He was actually _respecting _the Arbiter, looking up to him as the great hero that he supposedly represented.

_Am I not betraying my grandfather with these thoughts? _The thought plagued him as he and the other warrior jogged forward, moving down the valley carefully and keeping an eye out for enemy emplacements. It seemed, however, that their advance party had accomplished his mission: destroyed defenses were all they found with only a few stragglers remaining. The two Elites dispatched the survivors of the Arbiter's impressive attacks and kept moving down, eventually finding a stream that continued into the valley. The path was easy and along the way they received periodic radio transmissions from the Arbiter up ahead, including information about a Jiralhanae encampment that waited at the end of the stream.

As they approached that destination, however, the Arbiter radioed in again. "Field Commander," he began, sounding quite disturbed. "I have located the Councilors."

Despite the tone of the other's voice, Yarna found himself beginning to feel hope and relief. "Excellent, Arbiter! Tell them to head back towards myself and I shall call in a Phantom to escort them offâ€"

"Field Commander!" the Arbiter's voice cut him off. "It is of no use. They are all dead." The hope in his heart died and his shoulders sagged. If the Councilors were dead, then he had failed his mission and his entire race. The High Council was the governing body of the Covenant, and they alone had the power to either end the war now or unite the Sangheili against the Prophets' treachery. It had been 'Hayatasha's final wish they be saved.

Yarna fought down the wail of shame that welled up inside of him. It would not do to show his weakness here, deep in enemy territory. "Very well, Arbiter," he said; he could not hide the bitterness in his

voice, "we will join with you soon."

Suddenly the journey to catch up with the hero was much more labored and the wounded foes between himself and his destination were much viler. He struck them down viciously, tearing into his opponents with rage unparalleled by his companion. Finally the two found their way to the end of the valley and found themselves on a ledge overlooking the destruction of the camp. Nothing stirred in this basin but in the next one the golden-armored Sangheili could hear the sounds of battle. The two dropped into the basin, ran up a ledge around the outer rim, and entered a small hallway. Inside they were confronted with bodies of silver-armored Councilors, stacked up and leaned against the wall. Rage consumed Yarna and he ran straight through, passing through an armory without blinking an eye and into another hallway. There were more bodies there, and finally the reality of the situation hit him like a brick wall. He stopped running and instead fell to his knees in front of the bodies. This time, in the closed hallway and with the only witness being the member of Humble Unit, Yarna did not hold back his sorrow. He wailed and covered his face with his hands. He had failed!

He stayed for a full minute in this position, the other warrior unsure of what to do. He wanted to keep moving forward but knew that some needed time to grieve for their losses, and he too wished to mourn. Suddenly, however, Yarna straightened.

"Wait a moment," he muttered to no one but himself, "something is amiss here." The black-armored Elite looked over his shoulder as the Field Commander began counting the bodies. Yarna did a quick calculation in his head and jumped to his feet. "Some bodies are missing! Some Councilors may yet be alive!" Quickly the golden-armored Elite turned to his companion. "We must hurry forward! There may yet be a chance to rescue them!" Re-energized by the realization the pair moved to catch up to the Arbiter.

â€"â€"

Blessed Unit could only stare in mute horror at the sight in front of them. The human ship In Amber Clad had crashed into one of High Charity's large towers and now Kasa 'Yonomee, the unit sharpshooter, was reporting Flood forms coming from the ship. In the streets far below the sounds of civil war still sounded, but now Balask 'Zakamee feared the cry of the Parasite would soon overwhelm them.

"Kasa," he said into his radio, "where is the Parasite moving to?"

"The only forms I can see are perched on top of the ship, and they don't appear to be doing much," the younger Elite reported, "but I can see Flood coming out of the tower. They must be using the breach caused by the crash as an access point to get inside." The Senior Officer shuddered. Flood polluting the holy city? These creatures were true abominations, a mysterious and enigmatic blemish that had manifested on Halo. For a moment, he wondered if the Covenant had ever encountered them before on other Forerunner installations and merely covered them up. He quickly shoved the thought to the back of his mind; he could speculate later, but right now he had to act.

"Get down here now," he ordered, and a moment later Kasa's piton slammed into the deck nearby and he alighted on the floor. "Your ears, Blessed Unit. The tower systems are connected by gravity bridges all along their lengths, and it is by these means that the Flood will be able to spread the fastest." He looked at the warriors in front of them: they were exhausted after having fought the Flood already in the Quarantine Zone and their own brothers in the city. He didn't want to have to put them through more of the same, but he had no choice.

"We will move downward along the inside of this tower," he continued, "and we will do so quickly and silently. The less combat we face, the better off we'll be. As we go along we will place traps for both the subverters and the Parasite."

Opom stepped forward. "How will we do that, Excellency?"

"There will be an armory two levels down from our current location," Balask replied, pointing to the floor for added emphasis. "We can procure extra ammunition for our weapons and anti-matter charges to place throughout the tower. As soon as we exit we will destroy this structure, thus hampering the Flood's ability to spread."

Kasa was next to pose a question. "What shall happen to the other tower? The Flood will be able to spread in the opposite direction among the towers as well, and this plan will do nothing to stop them from spreading throughout the city."

Balask nodded, understanding his point. "There is no way for us alone to stop their spread, and we must follow Field Commander 'Orgalmee's orders and escape into space." _Let the Flood have this city for all I care, _he silently added. He dared not say such heresy in front of his unit. "Let us go." The warriors nodded and activated their active camouflage, moving across the open deck and into the tower. The squad located a gravity lift down and entered it, riding it for two levels before disembarking. Jiralhanae guards were stationed everywhere but fortunately no Kig-Yar, the only ones who could possibly detect them while they made their way to the armory.

Inside were stacks of ammunition containers, rows of weapons, and crates of grenades. Balask and Kasa silently neutralized the guards while the Grunts began loading up on ammo. The two Elites joined them, replenishing their supplies and filling up satchels with grenades for themselves and the diminutive warriors. Finally, they located the anti-matter charges. The devices resembled their bombs, the kind that they often used for human orbital platforms; in fact, they operated on the same principle. Upon being detonated the containment bubble inside would collapse and allow the anti-matter within to spill out, creating a large and very powerful explosion. Each of the Sangheili warriors took one of the disc-shaped explosives to bring further down the tower and left a third in the armory. When it was activated it linked up to the Covenant Battle Net, awaiting the detonation code from the Special Operations squad.

"We must keep moving," Balask said as they headed out the door. "Be wary of the traitors, but stay ahead of the encroaching Parasite." The squad left the armory behind and began making their way back towards the gravity lift.

â€"â€"

Elsewhere in High Charity, Cortana the Artificial Intelligence suddenly detected an unusual blip in the system. She momentarily turned her attention away from the Master Chief, who was sitting tight and watching a battle unfolding in an area called "the Mausoleum." As far as she could tell, or care, it held a great deal of significance for the Elites, and that explained why four silver-armored Ultras were dug in on the second tier.

She traced the disturbance back to a tower close to the crash site of _In Amber Clad. _In forethought she set up a secondary function to scan Covenant transmissions for human survivors, but focused on what was now apparently an idle weapons code.

Upon closer examination, she realized that it was for one of their anti-matter charges. _Strange, _she thought to herself, _putting such a sensitive device on a network to deliver the detonation order when a radio transmission could accomplish it so much more securely. Anyone skilled in hacking could set it to blow early... or deactivate it entirely. _The bomb had been planted by a Special Operations team of Elites, but Cortana couldn't fathom why. Perhaps it would serve to destabilize the Brutes? But why would they resort to damaging what they usually regarded as sacrosanct? Besides, such a close-proximity detonation to the ship could put any human survivors at risk.

Acting quickly, she disarmed the bomb and cut the network connection. As she departed to return to the Chief's aid she left a subroutine behind to scan the tower for similar detonation signals and snuff them out.

â€"â€"

Planting the charges was easy: Balask had years of experience and Kasa had conducted similar exercises in training. Even the Unggoy were unusually calm, content to keep watch for approaching hostiles that might detect the invisible Special Operations team. It all went smoothly, and there was no reason to be at all unnerved.

No reason except for the brown haze that was growing thicker by the minute and the distant wails and screams that signaled the approach of the Flood. Many of the Jiralhanae were rushing to the infested areas, leaving behind Kig-Yar and Yanme'e to guard. At first Balask had been concerned about the former, but their senses were being clouded with fear; the haze also helped to mask their presence. The Drones weren't a concern.

Finally the team planted the last anti-matter charge on the ground floor and made their way outside. Two Brute guards glanced curiously at the doors that seemed to part of their own volition until Balask and Kasa fired their Carbines through their faces, the bodies collapsing in heaps on the ground. Blessed Unit retreated to a safe distance from the tower and took cover behind a low, decorative wall and disengaged their camouflage units. Balask accessed the Battle Net and sent the activation codes to the bombs...

... but they weren't there. Growling in frustration, he searched the network but could find no traces of the explosives that they had planted just moments before. It was impossible! He had been doubly sure that they were properly connected to the network and ready to receive the commands. He was just about to order them to turn around

and go back inside when the doors they had exited a moment before exploded outward and Flood came pouring out of the tower.

"Fall back!" he shouted upon seeing the overwhelming forces in front of them. Opom, Sesepe, and Nunot took off at a full run while he and Kasa backpedaled, firing their Carbines until their cartridges were dry and then switching to Plasma Rifles.

"What happened to the bombs?" Kasa asked, pausing his firing to allow the rifle to cool down.

"They were sabotaged," Balask growled, depressing the firing contact further to make up for the Junior Officer's lapse.

"By the Brutes or by the Flood?"

The Senior Officer could only shake his head. It was certainly possible that the Jiralhanae could have deactivated the weapons, but it was also unlikely: Blessed Unit had tripped no alarms and alerted no creature to their presence. The Parasite might have done it, but they would have had to absorb someone who had knowledge about the bombs and their locations.

A human tracer round zipped by his head, bringing the Sangheili warrior forth from his thoughts. He raised his rifle to fire, but it made only a pitiful pattering before belching vapor: the battery was completely drained. Cursing heartily, Balask tossed aside the useless weapon and withdrew his sidearm. In order for the small pistol to be of any use at all he would have to charge each shot, which would drain the battery much quicker, but he was out of options.

"If only I hadâ€" Suddenly a combat form leaped from the approaching wave and landed right on top of him. As the two fell to the ground, Balask fired the pistol out of shock right into its chest, vaporizing the infection form within. The transformed human flopped on top of him, but as the Senior Officer struggled to get up he saw a weapon secured to the Parasite's back. His eyes lit up with recognition: a human shotgun.

He forcefully ripped the cool metal firearm from the corpse, kicked the biomass off, and raised the weapon while still on his back. As the wave approached he fired, the eight gauge magnum round blowing the closest combat form to shreds. He adjusted his aim and fired again, managing to take down two at the same time. The black-clad warrior rolled to his feet, dropped to one knee, and fired twice in rapid succession: a horde of infection forms and a handful of legs were vaporized in the dual blasts. Laughing, Balask let go of the pump and withdrew a grenade, planting it right at his feet before springing back. The explosion atomized the closest enemies and simultaneously detonated nearby grenades, beginning a chain reaction as fragmentation and plasma varieties blasted apart the entire wave.

A few feet away, Kasa stood in silent amazement at what his commanding officer had just accomplished. Balask spared a look and a grin at the young soldier before turning his attention back to the tower. Already another wave of Flood was gathering to rush forward; their numbers never seemed to deplete. The coy smile quickly turned into a grimace, and the Senior Officer turned and began to jog towards the city.

"Be quicker, Kasa," he warned as the Junior Officer joined him. "We must stay ahead of the Parasite if we are to get to the hangars on time."

Kasa nodded and the pair sped up, sprinting to the closest buildings and locating their wayward Grunts. The Unggoy approached them, having found a small arms depot nearby: Sesep carried a turret with him and Opom wielded a fresh Needler. "Excellency," Opom began, "we have contacted some of our remaining forces in the city and they say that there are still plenty of Phantoms in the hangars."

Balask nodded, shouldering the human shotgun and popping a fresh cartridge into his Carbine. "Then we shall hurry. Beware the Parasite: their influence shall spread very rapidly." With that the group cloaked and hurried towards the closest hangar. Despite its relative proximity it was still a long way going and took several minutes to reach. And as it came into sight, a new complication arose.

The ground beneath them suddenly bucked and shuddered, a tremor running through the holy city. The unit stopped and glanced about, unsure of what was going on. "What is... it..." Kasa began, but his voice trailed off ominously. Concerned, Balask turned around to see what it was that so derailed his Junior Officer, and he himself paled slightly when he saw. In the center of the city, the Forerunner ship that provided power had broken the conduits and was lifting off. Slowly the delta-shaped craft lifted from its base and accelerated out through the special opening in the roof. It was only ever deployed during dire space battles when it could boost the morale of the Ship Masters, but something told the Senior Officer of Blessed Unit that this was not one of those times. After the ship was out of sight power remained for a moment longer, and the city began to slowly fall to darkness. Lights faded and screams filled the air, screams of civilians who had holed themselves up against the Flood whose locks had just failed, screams of soldiers who had been relying on the automatic defenses that now were powerless. All the unit could do was look on as their entire world, the basis for their faith, was left behind broken and shattered as the Prophet of Truth escaped into Slipspace. The Parasite was already in control of over a third of the city, with the panic- and grief-stricken forces falling to their onslaught.

Balask watched for a moment longer before turning back toward the hangar. Kasa looked to him suddenly, a horrified look that spoke a single thought: Are we really to leave our people to die?

The Senior Officer couldn't meet his eyes, but he nodded. "Come, we must depart immediately," he spoke aloud to the whole squad. "High Charity is lost."

13. Race Against the Machine

Chapter 13: Race Against the Machine

Though the Forerunner ship powered High Charity, there were some emergency generators for certain key systems in the city. It could not be relied upon that the ship would always be there, since it had been arranged in such a manner as it could leave, and thus the vital

system of maintaining force-fields that kept the oxygen in and the vacuum of space out was considered worthy of its own power source. The dropship bays had such back-ups, so when the team entered the hangar they were not surprised to see the barriers still up.

However, they were surprised to see that they weren't the first ones there. A handful of combat forms were disembarking from a recently arrived Phantom, still oblivious to the presence of Blessed Unit. Taking advantage of their unawareness, Balask 'Zakamee signaled his team to activate their camouflage and move quietly to the other side of the hangar where an unattended dropship hovered. They reached it quickly and without incident, ascending the gravity lift and into the belly of the ship. While the Unggoy set about deactivating the lift and readying themselves for departure, Balask took Kasa 'Yonomee to the cockpit.

"Get us out of here," he ordered. The younger Sangheili hesitated as he sat down in the pilot's seat. He looked over the holo-panel before him in confusion.

"Excellency, I am unfamiliar with the controls," he said, "I have not flown a dropship since I left Institution."

"Then you have flown far more recently than I have," Balask growled.

Nodding, the Junior Officer gripped the flight hologram and pressed several glyphs; the Phantom disengaged itself from its station and hovered uneasily in the air. The Flood on the other side of the bay took notice and fired their weapons, but they just impacted harmlessly on the outer hull. The automatic turrets quickly identified them as threats and rotated to fire.

"Open the force fields," the Senior Officer ordered. "That way we can escape and suck the Parasite out into space." As Kasa looked around for the authorization code, Balask looked out into space. The Brute-controlled ships that had so recently been forming a protective ring around High Charity were now accelerating away and out of sight; he caught glimpses of some Slipspace ruptures.

Repeated buzzing interrupted his thoughts and he glared down at the young Sangheili. "I'm sorry, Excellency," Kasa said, "but I do not know the authorization code to lower the barriers."

"Simply remove them, then," Balask growled and plopped himself down in the co-pilot's seat. "Turn control of the turrets over to me." A small targeting console flickered to life in front of him and he began to retarget the turrets. The port turret kept the fire on the Flood, but the central and starboard turrets began razing the sides of the force fields, looking for the generators. Something exploded and the fields flickered and died; the Phantom rocked and shot forward as the air was sucked out of the hangar along with several Flood forms. Kasa, who didn't expect this maneuver, took a moment to regain control of the craft.

Balask studied the tactical map in front of them. "Fly towards that carrier," he ordered, pointing at one that was approaching from the direction of Halo. "Hail them when we get close and make sure there is no Flood aboard." The young Sangheili complied, sending and

receiving the appropriate messages. As they neared the docking bay, however, a live-feed monitor appeared before them dominated by the image of a Ship Master.

"This is Ship Master 'Kaeromee," he said. "Do you carry the taint with you?"

"Nay," Balask replied, "we are clean. We have come from High Charity."

The Ship Master paused, seeming to consider the black armor the two Elites in the Phantom wore. "Very well. Come aboard, but give us use of your dropship; we need to rescue as many civilians from the holy city as we can before they are overrun by the Flood." The Senior Officer of Blessed Unit nodded and the screen winked out of existence. Kasa less-than-expertly guided them into a hangar and the team disembarked, hurriedly shoved out of the way by infantrymen who had orders to rescue the doomed noncombatants. Balask's thoughts quickly turned to panic as he thought of his mate, but remembered that she was on Sanghelios. A sigh of relief forced its way from between his mandibles.

"Yes," Kasa mistakenly agreed, "it is good to be out of that maelstrom."

Blessed Unit was rushed through a medical examination to be sure that they were, first, not infected and, second, in good enough health to be able to assist around the ship, which Balask learned to be the Drowned in Honor. After they were cleared, his Unggoy were dispatched to get some rest while he and Kasa made their way to the bridge.

They pressed the chime at the door, and a moment later the portal parted, allowing the two access to the bridge. 'Kaeromee glanced over his shoulder, clearly annoyed.

"A Ship Master's bridge is his fortress," he called out to them, "and as such he should not be interrupted while in it." The pair of Sangheili, too tired to argue formalities with him, merely strode up to the base of the command platform.

"How goes the evacuation of High Charity?" Balask asked.

'Kaeromee scowled. "This whole incident has thrown us off," he said. "We are placing as many ships as we can on rescue duty while trying to maintain a coalesced front against both the Jiralhanae and the Flood." A beeping interrupted him, and he glanced at the offending panel with disdain. "Well, the last Jiralhanae ship has entered Slipspace."

"Where are they going?" Kasa asked.

The Ship Master shrugged his shoulders. "All I know is that they are following the Forerunner ship that left moments ago. Supposedly the Prophet of Truth is aboard."

"Then we must give chase!" the youngest Sangheili present demanded, stepping up onto the ramp. "We must pursue these devils to the end of the universe and destroy them! It is the only way to stop this civil war from spreading!"

"Calm yourself," Balask cautioned, placing a restraining hand on the Junior Officer's shoulder. He turned his attention back to the Ship Master. "What of Halo? How goes the battle to stop the Brutes?"

The image of the sacred ring filled the aft cameras. "I dropped off Field Commander 'Orgalmee and his troops a while ago before I was caught up stopping Brute- and Flood-controlled dropships from leaving the ring. The last report I received dictated that they were en-route to the control room to retrieve the index from the Brute Chieftain." A smirk crossed the Ship Master's face. "I also heard that the Arbiter has returned from the dead to aid them."

As Balask and Gersha began discussing this turn of events, Kasa's eyes remained riveted to the screen and the ring world pictured on it. He squinted at the image, thinking he saw a shimmer forming at the center of the ring, but he couldn't be sure. Shortly, however, it became more pronounced and began to take on a yellow color. Energy was visibly being pulled from stations across Halo into this vortex and swirling together.

"Excellencies?" he questioned quietly at first, and repeated himself louder when they didn't respond. They both cocked their heads at him, and then followed his eyes. When their gazes fell on the ring their mandibles parted in shock.

"By the Gods," Balask muttered.

"This is our salvation," 'Kaeromee whispered excitedly. "The Great Journey is beginning."

â€"â€"

Yarna crouched low behind a wall, waving for the forces following behind him to do the same. They had pressed onward, catching up to the Arbiter and managing to link up with more Sangheili forces and now they were in a two-leveled room with a ramp linking them. The Arbiter had cloaked and gone ahead to scout things out, leaving the Field Master, an Elite Major, and two Elite Minors to hold their positions.

A moment later the Arbiter materialized out of the air, grinning. The golden-armored Sangheili cocked his head in confusion at the hero's change in mood, but the other just tossed him a Carbine and motioned for him to follow.

"In here," he said, pointing around a corner, "are holding cells. One holds a pair of Hunters, and two more hold Councilors." Yarna's heart leaped into his throat. "I will cloak and free the Hunters to disrupt the guards, but you must neutralize the Jackals on the upper level and free the Councilors."

"Affirmative, Arbiter," the Field Commander replied, and the hero faded from view. Quickly he waved the others forward and directed them to wait until he gave the signal. As soon as he heard a small crash and the sound of a force field shutting down he jumped out from around the corner and turned, firing twice in rapid succession and piercing two Kig-Yar skulls.

"Go!" he cried to the Elites, and they burst into the room, roaring

challenges and firing plasma. Chaos reigned as the Jiralhanae guards tried to repel their attack, but with the addition of the Lekgolo pair nothing could be done in such cramped quarters. In the midst of the frenzy Yarna destroyed the generators for the Councilors' cells, setting them free. They leaped into the battle, energy swords blazing and cutting through Brutes. When the carnage was over, the element of surprise had protected the Sangheili from any loss of life while depriving the Jiralhanae of theirs.

"Excellencies," Yarna walked up to the Councilors and bowed. "I am overjoyed to see you survived."

"Indeed," one of them replied, "but we are the only two."

A pained look spread across the other's face. "Alas! We were the only spared, and only for the reason that the Jiralhanae looked forward to torturing us." The Field Commander looked at them carefully. They indeed showed signs of having seen abuse.

The Arbiter approached them. "Councilors," he began, "I would dearly love to be able to evacuate you from the surface, but there are more pressing matters to attend to." Both Councilors, and Yarna, looked quizzically at the ornately-armored Sangheili. "The Brutes plan to activate this ring and..." He hesitated, seeming to search for the right words. "... and begin the Great Journey prematurely."

"Vile beasts," one of the nearby Elites swore, "to begin the Journey without the Assembly present! It is heresy!"

Yarna opened his mouth to protest, to interject that he had a mission to accomplish, but one of the Councilors waved him down. "This is far more important, Field Master, than your mission to get us into space." He hefted his sword, the glow shining from the silver armor adorning his body. "We will kill the Jiralhanae and restore honor to our race!" The six Elites and two Hunters raised a battle cry and ran onward, led by the legendary Arbiter.

"What is the plan?" one of the Councilors asked.

Yarna was the first to speak. "We must get access to the control room, and in order to do that we will take the Scarab stationed here and launch a frontal assault while Commander 'Vadumee takes a force of Special Operations Elites to take the _Purity of Spirit._"

The Councilor nodded. "A sound plan. Tell me, who leads the Brutes in this attack on our very faith?"

"Their chieftain, Tartarus," the Field Commander spat the words out. The group reached the top of a sloping ramp and exited the structure, emerging on an overhanging platform. A host of Brutes populated the surface, unaware of the intrusion of the Sangheili, two of which were holding a group of human Marines at gunpoint while a third listened to a radio.

"These humans are not needed," it growled, setting the unit down and raising its Brute Shot to decapitate one of the soldiers. "Execute them now!" Before the blade could swing, however, Yarna raised his Carbine and fired, putting three depleted-uranium pellets through the side of its head. The two Jiralhanae closest to them looked over in alarm, but too late as the Lekgolo raised their shields and knocked

them aside as if they were nothing more than bags of grain. As the bodies flew over the edge chaos erupted on the platform: the seven Sangheili opened fire as the Brutes returned and the humans dived away, one of them running towards the Scarab. The Elites paid them no mind, however, as the Brutes were the ones who were armed. Grenades flashed from the barrel of the Jiralhanae launchers, ricocheted off walls and detonated, peppering the attackers' personal shields with shrapnel. The Sangheili took cover while the Hunters hunkered down, raised their Fuel Rod Cannons, and fired, cutting a swath through the Brutes. The Arbiter broke rank and charged forward, igniting his energy sword and slashing out at the hairy creatures.

It was like a well-rehearsed dance, with the Arbiter moving elegantly through enemy fire. Several crimson plasma waves flew at him accompanied by a handful of Brute Shot grenades, but he merely ducked and wove his way through them, growing ever closer. He lunged forward, stabbing one Brute through the chest while simultaneously kicking another off the edge of the platform, the Jiralhanae soldier bouncing off the leg of the Scarab and landing in the dirt below with a sickening crunch. One foe remained, and he hastily threw his rifle aside and dropped to all fours, charging the Sangheili hero. However, the Arbiter merely crouched down and spun his blade in a figure-eight as the Brute reached out for him, slicing off both arms and lopping off its head. The body flopped on top of him, but he kicked it off. Silence descended upon the platform as the remaining Elites turned their attention to the humans.

Before anything could be done, however, the Scarab came to life; all those congregated looked up in shock as the main cannon pointed directly at the Arbiter. The ornately-armored Sangheili took a tentative step back, even more surprised when a human's voice filtered through the external speakers.

"Listen," the gravelly voice began, "you don't like me and I _sure _as Hell don't like you! But if we don't do something, Mr. Mohawk's gonna activate this ring, and we're _all _gonna die." Despite the situation, Yarna felt a smirk grow across his face; he had often wondered at the ridiculous manner at which the chieftain's hair stood up. However, he could not ignore the fact that a human was controlling a Scarab and could fry them all at any time he wished.

"Tartarus has locked himself inside the control room," the Arbiter reluctantly answered.

"Well, I just happen to have a key," the human inside said, and the main cannon extended from the body, forcing the "eyelids" of the vehicle to iris open in a display of what the vehicle could accomplish. "Come on," he instructed the Arbiter, "grab a Banshee and gimme some cover. He's gonna know we're coming." Before anyone could question how the human knew Banshees were inbound, two of the aircraft in question flew around a distant cliff-face and approached the platform. They touched down and two Elite Minors leaped out, one of whom Yarna recognized for the second time in the same day.

"Take my Banshee, Arbiter!" Maka 'Fulsamee called out to the legendary hero, and walked over to the Field Commander as the Arbiter did so. "Excellency, I'm overjoyed to see you again."

Yarna nodded. "You were assigned to fly banshees?"

Maka smiled sheepishly. "I and my comrade were separated from the unit shortly after our arrival. We happened across a Jiralhanae vehicle dump, and... well, we couldn't resist." He motioned to the craft that was now taking off and veering to follow the valley. "That glider has seen the deaths of many Brutes this day. It is worthy of such a hero as the Arbiter."

"All of you climb aboard!" The human's voice tore through the air again. "That Elite can't take that white monkey bastard alone, he's gonna need reinforcements!" The humans all hollered and whooped, climbing quickly onto the Scarab, but the Sangheili and the two Lekgolo hesitated for a moment. They turned to the Councilors for guidance.

One of them shrugged. "Do as he says," he ordered, "for he is correct: the Arbiter will require our assistance. Besides, he is pointing a gargantuan weapon at our heads." The ex-Covenant boarded the four-legged craft, and as soon as the last was aboard it lurched forward, turning and beginning to follow the course the Banshee was following.

Once they were below deck, Yarna and the two Councilors strode to the forward section where the cockpit was. At the controls was a dark-skinned human Sergeant, flanked by two Marines.

"Human," the Field Commander said, not bothering to hide his disbelief or his anger, "do you know how to operate this Scarab?"

One of the Marines took a step forward, but the Sergeant's words stopped him. "Why don't you just sit back and enjoy the ride, Goldilocks?" he said, looking over his shoulder and flashing a sarcastic smile of pearly white teeth. "You let me and the boys worry about driving." Yarna growled and took a step forward, but the other Marine raised a shotgun and pointed it right at his head.

"I wouldn't do that, amigo," the creature warned. The Field Commander hesitated, but the Councilors pulled him back by the shoulder and led him away.

"Excellency," Yarna said once they were out of the humans' earshot, "do we let these creatures speak that way? They are an affront to us!"

"An affront to what?" the Councilor cut him off, glaring at him with steely eyes. "To our Gods? Those Gods who the Prophets introduced our people to? The Gods we have followed for the past nine Ages? Those Gods with whom only the Prophets themselves could speak? Open your eyes, Field Commander. There are no Gods." Yarna's mandibles hung open in utter shock at the Councilor's blatant display of heresy. He went on. "We have been used by the Prophets for millennia. Has it not occurred to you, why we did not allow the humans to join the Covenant? Why we did not offer them the same 'salvation' as the Prophets gave us?" He could only shake his head, still too surprised to speak. The Councilor leaned in close. "Because they were smart enough to see what we couldn't. Because, had we absorbed them, they would have discovered the truth behind the Prophets' Grand Designs."

The other Sangheili and the Lekgolo pair had gathered around them, and the Councilor turned to address them all. "The Prophets have betrayed us! They have torn this Covenant asunder, a Covenant founded on lies and deceit. There is no Great Journey; the Prophets have only used the Forerunner as an excuse to wage their personal war against the humans. Those creatures have done nothing but fight for their race, standing honorably before us as we wrongfully exterminated entire planets and killed billions. Look at your hands, my brothers! They are covered in blood, the blood of innocents! We must stop the Jiralhanae here; stop them from beginning whatever it is that the Forerunners _truly_ designed the sacred ring to do, and only after we do that shall we seek revenge against the Prophets!"

All were silent as the truth began to sink in. There was much to atone for, many lives claimed in the process of working towards a falsehood. What thoughts had once been considered heresy and pushed down to the bottom of their minds were now bubbling to the surface, crying in outrage at the dishonorable ways of the Covenant: the subjugation of races, the glassing of planets, the genocide of entire species for standing against them. The humans had not been the first, and had it not been for these revelations, would not have been the last.

Yarna looked up suddenly, seeing that the two Marines had stepped away from the Sergeant to investigate the commotion that had begun. The still air was tense as the two sides stared at each other. Nobody moved for a full minute, until the Field Commander walked up to the two humans. He towered over them by a full two feet; despite his intimidating presence, the two glared up at him with an intense hatred, brought into existence after decades of genocide. The looks in their eyes, those he had seen on countless humans on many battlefields, had once filled him with satisfaction; but now he felt the inkling of a new emotion: grief. Sorrow and regret filled him, and he took a step back... and bowed low before them. Prostrating himself in front of a twenty-seven year old enemy was unheard of in Sangheili culture, but nothing could be said to undo what had been done. Among the Sangheili, they had recognized the humans to be respectable and honorable warriors throughout the war. When they faced them on the battlefield they knew they fought worthy rivals.

Just as the others began to follow suit, the deck shook beneath their hooves twice in succession before the Sergeant's voice filled their ears again. "Everybody get ready!" he said over the radio. "That Elite's gone ahead, but we've gotta catch up before we miss all the action." The Scarab lurched with renewed speed, and the occupants rushed to stations. Sangheili moved to man some of the unattended systems while a Major moved to the front in order to help the human pilot. Yarna, the Councilors, and two others including young Maka went up onto the deck. As they stepped out, a hostile Banshee flew by, hastily firing at them but cleanly missing. One of the turrets onboard the Scarab came to life, tracked the craft, and fired; projectiles, like those fired from a Needler but as long as an Elite's forearm, flashed from the barrel and impaled the craft. There was a sapphire fireball and the wreckage, including a halved Jiralhanae body. Upon seeing the point defense systems active, the remaining Banshees in the flight wisely reconsidered their assault and pulled up and away.

It took a few minutes, but the Scarab laboriously reached the

structure that housed the control room. The human settled the craft alongside the entrance platform, or what was left of it: the Scarab had fired and utterly destroyed the door and much of what was beyond it. The Elites, had it happened several minutes prior, would have struck the Sergeant down for heresy, but now they didn't care. All they wanted to do was have their vengeance, for all those fallen to the Prophets' treachery. They didn't want to think of what had just transpired. There was a gap between the Scarab and the platform, and the Elites and the humans had to jump it; the Hunters were too heavy and remained behind.

Yarna saw that the Sergeant was poorly equipped, holding only his UNSC sidearm, and apparently Maka saw so, too: he walked up to the dark-skinned human and offered him a Beam Rifle he had been toting on his back. "This will serve you better than that, human," he said, handing it over. The Sergeant took it and gave the Elite a half-grin, half-scow. The group proceeded into the structure, finding no opposition and instead only bodies from where the Arbiter had been.

Finally, at the end of a long hallway, they emerged into the control room. It was a massive sphere with a central circular platform seeming to float in the middle; several bridges made to reach out to it but fell short, the nearest terminating in a holographic terminal in front of which five Brutes and the Arbiter were standing. The white-haired Jiralhanae Chieftain Tartarus held one human, a female, who in turned clutched the Sacred Icon; nearby a Brute Captain held the Holy Oracle. It was trying to explain something, but the chieftain interrupted it by grabbing it and shaking it violently.

At this, the human Sergeant shouldered the beam rifle. "Please," he called out loud enough for the assembly of Jiralhanae to hear, "don't shake the light bulb." He trained the crosshairs of the weapon on Tartarus's head, but the Brutes at his side began advancing, obviously of the intention to rip the human apart. "If you wanna keep your brain inside your head, I'd tell those boys to chill." Overcome with rage but facing instant death, the chieftain barked an order to his warriors. They halted their advance.

The Sergeant nodded to the Arbiter. "Go ahead. Do your thing."

The Arbiter turned back to the Oracle the white-haired Jiralhanae held in his grip. "The sacred rings, what are they?"

"Weapons of last resort," the Oracle said matter-of-factly, "built by the Forerunners to eliminate potential Flood hosts, thereby rendering the parasite harmless."

"And those who made the rings?" demanded the ornately-armored Sangheili, "What happened to the Forerunners?"

"After exhausting every other strategic option," it began, "my creators activated the rings. They and all additional sentient life in three radii of the galactic center died, as planned." It paused for a moment. "Would you like to see the relevant data?"

On the bridge, all the Elites grew suddenly rigid. If this was true, their blind reverence had nearly killed all life in the galaxy. A few exchanged wide-eyed glances: could it be true? Was the Great Journey nothing more than widespread death, the Covenant nothing more than a

suicide cult? The Arbiter shook his head as those present went from denial to anger to sorrow to resolution; there was a battle to be fought.

How many more lies would they have to endure?

"Tartarus," he murmured, looking for one last chance to avoid killing the chieftain, who could turn the Brutes to the side of the Elites. "The Prophets have betrayed us."

Looking incredulously at the Oracle in his hands, the white-haired Jiralhanae appeared to waver in his resolve to activate the ring. However, a few of the Elites who had lost their families on High Charity stepped forward and raised their weapons, forcing the Brute to make a quick decision. With a mighty throw he struck the Sergeant in the face with the Oracle and turned back to the female holding the Icon.

"No, Arbiter," he said, forcing the human's hand into the holo-panel, thereby inserting the Icon. It slowly sank into the hologram. "The Great Journey has begun, and the Brutes, not the Elites, shall be the Prophets' escort!" A milky-white shield formed around Tartarus, hefting up a gravity hammer at his feet, as the machinery in the room began to hum and clank, the platform in the middle separating into three layers around a column of energy.

_If something is not done now, _Yarna realized in a panic, _this ring will fire! _He quickly looked over his shoulder at the troops assembled; he wished the Hunter pair had been able to join them. "Forward!" he cried, activating his energy sword. "Kill the Jiralhanae!" They roared in response and charged forward, swinging swords or firing weapons. The four Captains that flanked Tartarus fell almost immediately and the chieftain leaped to the central platform, the Elites hot on his heels.

Yarna and one of the Councilors landed first. They looked up just in time to see the massive Brute bring his hammer down onto the silver-armored politician. He was crushed, and the resulting gravity wave from the impact sent Yarna skidding in the other direction. The Arbiter landed next, followed by the rest of the Elites, and began to draw Tartarus away. The Field Commander stood up and rushed back into the fray.

The Sangheili had the Brute surrounded, but were unable to penetrate his shield. Raising his weapon the chieftain swung, sending several warriors flying. Yarna ducked and braced his legs against the gravity wave, looking up to see him preparing to swing again. Suddenly three purple beams shot down from above, striking the shield. It vanished with a flash.

"Hey!" the Sergeant called down, and the Elites looked up at him. He had somehow recovered quickly enough from unconsciousness to fire the beam rifle with pinpoint accuracy. "His shields are down! Hit him now!" Realizing the truth behind his words several Sangheili turned and fired, but they were too late; his shield had regenerated and they had to wait until the human's rifle finished recycling its power core. Immediately they went on the defensive, waiting until the Sergeant could fire again.

Tartarus, however, would not wait. He lunged forward towards the

nearest Elite: Maka. Horror crossed the Field Master's consciousness. OrinÃ© had already been lost, left dead on the human home world; the same fate could not, _would _not befall the youngest 'Fulsamee. With a yell, Yarna threw himself forward, sprinting as fast as he could to intercept the Brute. With barely a nanosecond to spare the Field Master reached their position and pushed the young Sangheili out of the way, having just enough time to turn his head before the hammer smashed into him. His bones shifted and shattered under the weight as he was rendered airborne, soaring until he struck a pillar with a fantastic crunch of his spine and slid down, leaving a trail of purplish blood. Black flashed in front of his eyes and the room seemed to jump in activity with each dying flare of his mind. He watched frame-by-frame as the Elites were steadily beaten back, then as the Arbiter stepped up and fought Tartarus hand-to-hand. Three purple streaks slammed into the chieftain's energy shield and it died; the Arbiter drew back with his energy sword... Yarna's vision blacked out, but from the scream he could tell that the Sangheili hero had skewered the beast.

When his vision returned, he could see out of the corner of his eye that the human female was jumping from platform to platform, frantically trying to reach the light in the middle of the control room. However, the Arbiter's face dominated his view.

"You shall be all right, Field Commander," the hero said.

Yarna chuckled, spitting blood and teeth onto his armor. A terrible numbness had settled over him; he knew what was coming. "No, I shall not," he croaked, "but have we done it? Have we saved the galaxy from death?"

A frightful rumbling overtook the entire chamber, a violent tremor shaking the golden-armored Elite's prone form and causing the Arbiter to look over his shoulder at something. He knew it should have filled him with pain, but he could feel nothing. After a moment it subsided, and the ornately-armored Elite turned back to him. "Yes," he said, grasping the Elite's limp hand, "yes we have."

"Good," Yarna managed before a coughing fit shook him. "My... my grandfather was your predecessor. He wore that exact armor that you now bear. Forgive me for it was so petty a thing, but I believed you paled compared to his skill. He was the greatest warrior I had ever known and I... I did not want to believe there to be another. I felt that there could never be a replacement for him, after he died. I passed that resentment to you... I know now that I was wrong." He forced himself to look around, and he spotted Maka frantically rushing from body to body, searching for survivors. When he spoke, it seemed so faint and distant, even to himself. "I hope he shall be all right. His brother's spirit watches over him."

The Arbiter began to say something, but Yarna could hear no more sound. A white light enveloped his vision as the world and all its burdens burned away. Before him, in the white abyss, hovered an angel, a naked Sangheili with great silvery wings and a face that Yarna could almost recognize.

_OrinÃ©, _the dying Elite was unsure whether or not he actually spoke words; his vocal chords had ceased their function. _OrinÃ©, my friend, is that you? Have you come to take me on the Great Journey? _The figure did not respond, instead opening his arms wide and

flaring his wings out. The Elite fell into his friend's embrace and allowed the angel to close his wings over him. Happiness... true joy flooded him, pushing out all the negative feelings that had accumulated in him, neutralizing a life made for war and carried out such. Now there was nothing but bliss, an eternity of peace; had his brain not ceased functioning, perhaps he would have dwelt on the meaning of the word. It was unfamiliar to him, but such things no longer mattered.

Yarna 'Orgalmee passed from this world.

â€"â€"

Balask and Kasa watched in amazement as the golden light grew in size more and more with the passing of every minute, forming in the perfect center of Halo. They were so enraptured that they nearly missed the appearance of a smaller blue light from the surface of the ring, rocketing upwards towards the miniature sun. It flew straight, piercing the light at the center and tinting it the same sapphire color. For a moment the energy remained the same, collapsed inwards, and exploded outwards. A wave of blue energy rolled forth, passing over and through the ship. The three Sangheili on the bridge closed their eyes and waited for the Journey to take them.

It did not. They opened their eyes, and found themselves still on the bridge of the Drowned in Honor, still in each other's company and still staring out at Halo. It continued to spin silently as if nothing at all had happened. Silence settled over the trio.

"The Great Journey..." Ship Master 'Kaeromee said at last, "It's a lie?"

Balask's hand tightened into a fist. "The Prophets will pay with their blood."

"What's to happen now?" Kasa asked, unable to take his eyes off the ring hovering serenely in space. "The Great Journey is false, Truth has escaped, and the Parasite now controls the holy city." His shoulders sagged and his gaze fell to the deck. "All is lost."

"No!" Balask yelled, shocking both of his companions back from their respective dazes. "We are not finished here! We must recover our forces on the ring, destroy High Charity, and then..." He stopped mid-sentence and glared out the front viewscreen into the depths of space, a space the Sangheili once called a Goddess.

"Then we will get our revenge."

14. Epilogue & Credits

Epilogue

Ever since the Covenant had appeared above Earth, there had been widespread pandemonium. Lieutenant Mohamed Wiley tugged at his uniform as he rode the elevator downward, reflecting on the last few weeks. The public hadn't expected it, thanks to Section Two's damn "The Covenant is light-years away" propaganda, and what resulted was thousands of suicides, looting, and riots in the streets. With the Covenant's operations spreading across the planet the human race

needed to be united, not trying to kill itself; there were plenty of aliens out there willing to do it for them.

The elevator halted but the doors didn't part. Wiley growled. "Tiberius."

"Standard security scan," the voice of the prison level artificial intelligence said through a speaker. "You've been through it before."

"We've got a hot prisoner sitting in an interrogation room, and I need to be there now." He didn't bother to hide the irritation in his voice; Tiberius could pick it up and compare it to his vocal patterns in order to speed up the process.

"He's not going anywhere," the AI assured him. "Besides, you're clear." The doors slid apart, and with a courteous, if sarcastic, nod Wiley exited the elevator car and walked down the long grey hallway. Unlike some of the other levels of the facility, there was no decoration whatsoever; it was supposed to depress the prisoners being kept there. They already had plenty of reasons to be depressed, Wiley always thought: they were three kilometers below the surface of Earth in HighCom Facility Bravo-6, also known as "the Hive," with over ten thousand staff members between them and the exits, including a five-hundred strong Marine garrison. Counter-intrusion methods were set up throughout the base, several checkpoints, and most importantly a full lockdown capability in case something did happen.

Something was happening, however, and Wiley's superiors wanted to know what direction it was going in. While the Covenant was certainly moving to take the entire planet, none of their ships were attempting to move into glassing position. Obviously there was something here they wanted; otherwise they could just throw wave after wave of ships at the Overlord defense grid in space and gradually run them down. Besides that, the prowlers that were moving around in Luna's shadow were picking up some disturbing radio traffic; though Wiley wasn't privy to it, he heard rumors that there were reports of small-arms fire throughout the Covenant fleet.

Finally he arrived at the appropriate room. After flashing his identity badge at the two Marine guards he opened the door and stepped inside. Bright lighting awaited him, as well as two mirrors on either side of the room; only one was two-way, in order to reduce the chances of the prisoner guessing which the real thing was. His charge, as the brass had termed him, sat across a table, handcuffed to a very uncomfortable-looking chair. Wiley doubted aliens were supposed to fit in chairs like that anyway.

"Well," Wiley began, glancing over his charge's physical state: he was bruised and bloodied, with one eye almost completely swollen shut. "It looks like the interrogators did a number on you, eh?" The Geneva Accords extended only to human beings; the UNSC had quickly taken advantage of that loophole, and nobody really cared to contradict them.

The alien didn't respond. "Tell you what," Wiley continued, taking his seat, "we'll start simple. I'm Lieutenant Wiley, ONI Section One. What's your name?" He knew his name already, of course, but he didn't want to let it slip. If he could get this one to talk... well, that was a big if. He'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

Once again, the alien refused to speak or even move: he gave no sign that he was alive other than the steady rise and fall of his chest. "For ease of conversation, then, I'm going to call you Bob. You cool with that, Bob?" Usually that technique elicited some reaction, since for these guys names were important. This one, though, didn't even flinch. He just kept up his stony glare at the surface of the table.

Wiley decided to cut right to the chase. "All right, Bob, you know why I'm here. You've managed to sit through two of my predecessors, but I'm not going to let you stonewall me. You got that?" No response. Once again, his behavior was uncharacteristic and completely against his species' dossier.

"What did the Prophet of Regret want with Earth?" No answer. "What was your role in the invasion?" No answer. "Do you hold any responsibility for troop movements? Equipment requisitions? Rationing? Anything like that?" No answer.

The lieutenant started to drum his fingers on the table but quickly stopped himself. That would reveal his personal agitation. Truth be told, he didn't understand why they were wasting time questioning this one. There were other, more important battles to be won, not trying to beat an alien into submission. Besides, one of the others had already spilled his guts and told them everything...

A light went on in Wiley's head. That was the angle to break him.

"You know," he said, casually running his finger in a circle on the tabletop, "your little friend told us everything. About who you were, what you've done, what your responsibilities were..." He paused for effect and regarded his charge; for the first time since he walked in, the alien stirred in his seat, raising his eyes to meet the human's. "Yeah. You were apparently the Field Commander for the forces that destroyed both the Athens and the Malta, and the forces that conducted the ground invasion of New Mombasa. That's an awful lot of responsibility right there; surely your leadership trusted you with a few secrets?"

No reaction, he just maintained eye contact. For once, this was what Wiley was gunning for. "You mean," he faked surprise, "they didn't trust you at all? Not with one bit of tactical information?" Once again, the charge's lack of response was troubling. He apparently could not be goaded into giving information, but perhaps he could be guilted.

"Do you have a family, Bob?" he asked next. "A wife? Or is it a husband? Do you have children, little ones that scamper around your feet and laugh, and cry when they get hurt? We know that your species mates for life; have you found that mate yet?"

"Well, do you know how many people you've deprived of finding theirs? How many men and women your sacred Covenant has killed to get their hands on their precious little artifacts? Or what about all those big, happy families, Bob, the ones with lots of little kids and a happy couple watching after them? Because of you, nine-hundred seventy-eight billion people won't be happy! How many of your happy families have died? Huh? I'll bet it's zero! You've killed entire

worlds, but as far as we can tell you fuckers all wear armor and all kill innocent people!"

Before he realized what he was doing, he had his sidearm reversed in his hand and he was on the other side of the room, viciously clubbing his charge. He got in two fierce blows before he regained control of himself. Interrogators were supposed to leave their emotions by the door, but the macabre silence this one maintained was so unnerving it had forced him to lash out. And still, despite the savage beating, the alien did not even whimper.

Disgusted with both himself and the prisoner, Wiley took a handkerchief out of his pocket and began cleaning the butt of his pistol, wiping off the blood. He was sweating and breathing hard; it was time for him to get out of there. With a near-silent grunt he threw the purple-stained cloth down in front of the alien and turned to walk out of the room. Just as he got to the door, however, the prisoner's baseline voice broke through the silence.

"We do as we are instructed by the Prophets," he said calmly, as if he had not just suffered from hours of torture and questioning, "and they in turn do as they are instructed by the Gods. We do our holy work as it is assigned to us."

The alien's eyes were filled with unbridled hatred as Wiley turned back to face him. "My assignment is to kill humans, as many as I can before I die," he continued, purple blood running down his face and over his mandibles. "I will start my holy quest anew with all the humans in this facility, and work my way from there."

At this, Wiley could only grin mirthlessly and shake his head. "I'm sure you will, Bob. I'm sure you will."

He turned off the lights as he left, leaving OrinÃ© 'Fulsamee alone in the dark.

Credits

****Special Thanks to:****

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****Legal Musings:****

I do not own Halo: Combat Evolved, Halo 2, Halo 3, the Halo novels, or the continuity therein; that honor belongs to Â© Bungie and Â© Microsoft. My ownership extends only to the characters that I have

created with this story in mind, and even then Bungie is welcome to seize them in case they believe I have gone over the line.

****Final Message:****

Well, folks, that's a wrap on another one. I hate cliffhangers, don't you? Bungie left me little choice, though, but don't worry, there'll be more. Lots more, in fact: expect a sort of prequel to come out between now and the release of Halo 3, and keep an eye out for my work from other games. Also, you can look forward to the completion of Metroid Renegade; that bastard's been collecting dust for the longest time.

Negative Halo 3 will come out some time after Halo 3 is released; once again, I have to be able to stop playing long enough to write it and I have to be comfortable enough with the material. All we know about a release date right now, though, is sometime later this year.

I hope you enjoyed reading, because I enjoyed writing this. I'll see you all next time around.

****NOTE: I have gone back and revised much of the story to read better.****

End
file.